花散里

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑧

Hanachirusato
When Hikaru was on the earth

野村美月
イラスト◉竹岡美穂

ファミ通文庫

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「ぶ、文化祭の実行委員に、赤城是光くんを、推薦します」

花里みちる

帝門ヒカル
「赤城くんは、どれがいい？」
右楯月夜子
「おい、あ、明日のホームルームで、文化祭の出し物を決めるからな！」
赤城是光
「きみを文化祭の特別警護班に命じるわ」
斎賀朝衣

式部帆夏
左乙女葵
平安学園日舞研究会の
「ナースさんのジューススタンド」！
白衣の天使に癒されてください♥

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イラスト／竹岡美穂
野村美月

カバーイラスト別ラフ(1巻)

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Prologue

I gave my all trying to forget you.
With a cold attitude, I became aloof to you, never looking at your face, never hearing your voice, and I did my best, but I could never forget you.
Instead, how about you?
I suppose you did come visit me in the spur of the moment, thinking of those moments when our hearts were linked, when we spent our time in such passion and happiness. My hands were twined with yours, our legs locked together, and there was the melting, aching sweet despair.

Hikaru
In that stormy night
At the riverside when the waters surged.

I wonder whether my profile remains in your heart when you betrayed and rejected me.
I still wonder if I am your beloved.

But I suppose I will never be able to forget you.

Chapter 1 - Is Culture Festival Edible?

“Do you know, that King Solomon has a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines. The Bible records the liberal love of King Solomon and the women, applauding each other’s charms.”

It was a Sunday afternoon near the end of September.

Koremitsu was grimacing as he sat cross-legged on the corridor, supporting his chin with his hand and elbow. Hikaru, dressed in ancient Hebrew garb for some reason, began to recite Solomon’s Songs of Songs with a rich voice,

“Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.”

Hikaru was mesmerized in his own words, closing his eyes gently. Also, the longer eyebrows formed a faint shadow in the eyes, showcasing his angelic face. The faint colored, lofty hair gave a golden glitter when basked under the clear autumn sunlight.

Before he became a ghost and latched onto Koremitsu, Koremitsu’s friend, Hikaru, was the harem prince in school, and he was a fine, dashing young man.

However, he was overly jovial and flirtatious, a natural philanderer at heart. As the nickname implied, he was always in the embraces of girls when he was still alive, talking about love matters as he grinned sweetly whenever he talked about love.

At this point, only Koremitsu was able to see him, and his voice would not reach anyone else. Thus, Koremitsu could only act as the extremely bored friend hearing that sickeningly sweet story.

“Hey, do you feel the refreshing fragrance coming from the beautiful garden? I too, want to be embraced by the thousands of fragrances.”

(If I’m to get involved in that crazy mess of flowers, am I not going to suffer? Like if I’m in some girls changing room or a train carriage for girls only, just thinking about that’s going to cause my nose to explode!)

Koremitsu’s lips got increasingly tense.

(This guy’s always so glittery when talking about flowers and girls. If he’s still alive, that Solomon’s 1000 member harem’s going to get overtaken by him easily.)

It was a good thing for Hikaru to randomly ramble as compared to passing the time being all gloomy. If he was too cheerful however, that would cause Koremitsu some unease.

(Is this the time to wear such fluffy clothes and talk about a thousand fragrances and such?)

Koremitsu scowled as he looked towards the garden. The cat Lapis curled her slender body as she basked in the sun. She had her eyes closed, looking aloof as usual as her white fur swayed under the cooling breeze.
There were other cats around the house. One of them was a Siamese cat belonging to Mr. Hyoudo, a Nagauta teacher, and his family living down the street; another was a calico cat belonging to a property company president Mr. Daikan, and the last was a pussy cat with black patches around the mouth, belonging to the 'Right General' of an Izakaya. They were scattered all around the garden, warding each other off as they approached Lapis.
(Looks like…we got a lot more cats now.)
There was a lot of puffing in the garden the previous night, and Koremitsu was grumbling 'shut up' in the futon.
(Has our garden become a cat party?)
Koremitsu raised the tip of his nose as he pondered, and at this moment, Shioriko rushed out of the house, flailing a broom about.
"You guys are flirting with Lapis again! Shoo shoo! Get away from Lapis!"
Shioriko's little palms held onto the broom as she swung it vertically to shoo the cats. Her milky cheeks were dyed red, her long twintails swaying about.
"Ahh, Shiiko. A lady cannot be swinging a broom about. I have no memory of teaching you such things."
Hikaru lamented, and Koremitsu remained on the corridor, reminding her.
"Hey, after sparrows,you're now hunting cats? It's not good to abuse animals."
"I'm not abusing them."
Shioriko huffed and puffed, her tender body wheezing as she turned around, saying,
"I'm protecting Lapis from being ogled. It's still early for her to get a boyfriend."
"Eh, so those cats are aiming for Lapis?"
Koremitsu turned his stare towards Lapis, and beside him, Hikaru too turned his eyes.
"Lapis' as white as snow, and really is refined. The lapis eyes look mysterious, so it's expected that she's popular. There's definitely news of an unearthly cute pretty cat in our house circulating on the cat internet, and that's why they're gathered here."
(How strange. Is there really such a network?)
However, that Lapis remained as nonchalant as ever as she got to her feet elegantly, licking her fur with her pink tongue. The black pussy cat of the 'Right General' Izakaya hid behind the tree, peeking at Lapis with much longing, only to depart sadly after Shioriko scared it away. Certainly, it looked pitiful when seen from behind.
Koremitsu tried to placate her.
"Speaking of which, cats age differently from humans. Lapis may look like this, but isn't she already an adult herself?"
He said.

In terms of cat age, surely Lapis was a lot older than Shioriko as an elementary schoolgirl. Perhaps she was even older than Koremitsu, a big sister to him.
And Hikaru too mentioned worriedly like a parent,
"Lapis may be left behind if she cannot get a groom soon."
Shioriko puffed her cheeks, raising her little fists as she said.
"No no no, Lapis' still a kid. She's going to remain chaste before you make me an adult, big brother. I don't want Lapis becoming an adult before I do!"
And such a childish logic developed.
"Hey, did you just say something very problematic here?"
"L-Like I know!"
She glanced aside with her face blushing. One had to wonder if she was acting, or whether she was really embarrassed.
"If Lapis' late because of that, it's all your fault, big brother Koremitsu."
"It's none of my business here, right?"
"It does! It's pitiful that Lapis' unable to get a boyfriend if you continue being such a carnivore!"
"Koremitsu, even if it is for Lapis sake, I do forbid you from embracing Shiiko in another 7, 8 years. Even if I extend the leash quite a bit you have to hold it in for another 6 years."
(Hey! How did you get that specific number! Didn't you say that she's a no go until she's 20!?)
And after saying that, Shioriko came scampering over, putting her hands on Koremitsu's knees, and leaned forward, her large, watery eyes scanning him from bottom to top, and she asked with a serious tone,
"Did any oestrus kitty yearn for your love, big brother?"
"Watch your language! Hikaru's going to be sad here!"
"But I'm worried. You have a savage look, big brother, but you're a stupidly good guy. Whenever you see a feeble girl, you'll go running, shouting 'I'll protect you' or something!"
"I guess this is to be expected of you, Shiiko. You really understand Koremitsu well!"
(Shut up! You flirting ghost!)
"I-I thought that you wouldn't be popular, big brother, but it looks like you're very popular…"
"Huh? What are you talking about?"
Popular? Surely that was a word Koremitsu could not envisioned himself being associated with.
However, Shioriko leaned towards Koremitsu,
"For example, that Miss Shikibu, that really~ pretty Japanese Dance Club upperclassman, that student council president who's always harassing you at work, and that quick-mouthed newspaper club member with those bouncing breasts."
"They aren't related to this!"
"And there's Hikaru's fiancee, the princess."

“Ugh!”
An adorable, pretty girl appeared in Koremitsu’s mind, and he was left speechless as he recalled the flowing black hair resting on those slender shoulders.
(Damn it, what am I being shaken about?)
Koremitsu’s palms slowly sizzled, and his heart was pounding loudly, the tender, white hand ostensibly holding his again.
(St-stop thinking about it already! That’s…)
Koremitsu suddenly noticed Hikaru’s stare beside him. If he could not calm down soon, surely that would arise Hikaru’s suspicions again.
“How suspicious.”
But the one who suddenly frowned and mentioned this was Shioriko.
“Why aren’t you talking? Did something happen between you and Hikaru’s fiancee?”
“It’s nothing!”
Shioriko continued to lean her face close to Koremitsu, her entire weight practically pressing on his knees. Koremitsu faced her, sweat dripping as he yelled.
(Yeah, it’s really nothing! You know that, Hikaru!)
His mind sizzling, Koremitsu dared not to turn towards Hikaru.
Suddenly, the weight was removed from his knees.
Shioriko puffed her cheeks, moved her body away, and reached her hand out to Koremitsu, saying,
“Big brother, hand me your phone!”
“There’s nothing weird inside here.”
“It’s fine, just hand it over to me.”
She got into that stubborn child mode, and upon seeing that she was unwilling to back down, Koremitsu fished his phone out of his pocket and handed it over. Shioriko too took her phone out, and proceeded to do something suspicious.
“Okay. Here’s a protective charm.”
And saying that, she returned him the phone.
Koremitsu lowered his head, and found that the wallpaper was changed to Shioriko in a swimsuit; not the frilly miniskirt swimsuit she bought for the pool trip in summer vacation, but the school swimsuit! It seemed the photo was taken in the bathroom at home, and Shioriko was sitting in the empty bathtub, cupping her knees, grinning away! The innocent smile of a child, the bathtub, and the school swimsuit felt so awry, so gaudy!
“Wow, that is quite the show.”
From sidelong, Hikaru marveled in amazement.
“What’s with this photo, Shiiko! Are you planning to post this on the internet and sell this to those lolicon old men!?”
Shioriko was delighted to see Koremitsu worried about her.
“Relax. This is for your personal use, big brother. You love school swimsuits, don’t you? That’s why I took this personally for you. Hey, isn’t Shiiko’s

school swimsuit cute? You have to think of Shiiko when you see this during class. If you're hooked by another other woman, use this as a talisman. This will definitely scare them away."
"Well. This definitely will cause any girl in a 2m radius to run away."
"ARRRRRGGGGGGHHH! You're going to make me a lolicon delinquent again!? And I don't like school swimsuits!"
"You don't have to hide your fetishes from Shiiko, big brother Koremitsu.:"
"AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL KID SHOULDN'T BE SAYING THE WORD FETISH HERE!"
"Yes. Shiiko should learn the etiquette of being a fine lady. That will allow her to fetch boys."
(Stop giving her suggestions with such a cheerful look!)
Koremitsu retorted furiously, but after seeing him look leisurely as he floated in front of Shioriko, he too felt relaxed.
◊ ◊ ◊
Yes, Hikaru did not change too much from usual.
He was always so effervescent, always loving flowers and women.
He was always smiling, no different from behind.
However, Koremitsu would feel unease whenever he saw Hikaru lower his gaze and remain silent. Surely that was because of what the latter said.

—After 10 years, who will be standing by your side? No matter who stands beside you. No matter who stands beside Miss Aoi. I shall love both of you from the skies above.

Hikaru whispered this to Koremitsu, showing a transparent, tender, forlorn smile, his serene eyes staring at Koremitsu.
"You idiot! What are you misunderstanding now!? How can I be together with Aoi? The reason why Aoi held my hand is because…she just wanted to comfort me when I met that mother of mine who left home!"
Koremitsu scowled as he retorted harshly. Hikaru's smile remained so serene.
"Yes, perhaps I have been thinking too much. I have to forewarn you. No matter what path you choose, I shall continue to bless you forever, so that I can proceed to vanish from this world."
Hikaru seemed to be stating his will explicitly, his tone wise yet at ease.
Koremitsu kept a bitter face, unable to say anything.
◊ ◊ ◊
(But seriously…I never had any thoughts about snatching Aoi.)
The day after Shioriko forcefully changed the wallpaper.
Koremitsu was walking down the riverbank, joining the other students headed towards school as he continued on his meaningless thoughts as per the day before.

(Also, Aoi and I don't match at all. I'm a shunned guy called a delinquent king, and she's a princess. At most, Aoi simply knows me as Hikaru's friend.)
And Hikaru's cheery voice came from the side.
"Hurry and look, Koremitsu. There is a lot of Cosmos blooming by the river! The floral language of Cosmos is the true heart of a maiden! Look at the patch of Cosmos swaying with the wind. Do they not look like girls whispering about love?"
"It's scary seeing girls gathered in packs at the riverside."
Koremitsu retorted dejected.
(Speaking of which, this guy hasn't mentioned his own troubles at all. Are there no more girls he's worried about?)
Due to the issue about Sora's pregnancy, details about Hikaru's 'beloved' Fujino became vague. Hikaru himself did not seem prepared to break up with Fujino. Perhaps Hikaru had a load off his mind after confessing to Koremitsu that he loved his stepmother.
If that was the case, it was not strange for Hikaru, an ethereal being, to ascend to the afterlife.
That might be the reason why he said 'my will given the condition that I may disappear at any given time'.
Surely Hikaru too realized that there was a change happening within him.
(This woman-lover ghost's always so troublesome. I did have some thoughts of wanting him to ascend to the afterlife sooner…)
Hikaru had been floating beside him all this while, cheerfully chatting about flowers; if he were to disappear…upon thinking about that, Koremitsu's heart chilled.
(Tch, I'm being really sissy here.)
This meaningless brooding really was not befitting of him.
And he tensed his face, trying to disperse the fog in his heart as he proceeded forth.

Once he entered the classroom and sat at his seat, Honoka, fiddling with her phone, jolted her shoulders.
"Yo."
Koremitsu tried greeting in an awkward manner.
"…Hm."
Honoka replied with an aloof face and a vague tone, and went back to typing messages again.
Her neatly trimmed eyebrows gathered softly, and her lips were sealed. It seemed she was furious, yet enduring something, as she flailed her fingers stiffly.
(This girl's acting strange too.)
It was not the first time Honoka had been aloof and unhappy with Koremitsu. However, it seemed she was fearful of meeting Koremitsu in the eyes, rather than being peeved with him.

Whenever she did not talk to Koremitsu, Honoka would put on a cold front, looking unmoved. One had to wonder why she was so intimidated by him.
(Is Shikibu still mad about me flipping her cookies?)
When Koremitsu apologized for that, Honoka merely smiled at him, saying 'it…it's fine'.
However, that smile looked so forlorn, so unlike her usual self. That was the beginning of her attempts to shun him.
In that case, the reason was…
"I suppose the reason is not because she is still thinking about the cookies."
The voice that came from behind the ears caused Koremitsu's heart to jump.
He turned around, and saw Hikaru gave a meaningless gaze.
(Is this guy able to read my heart? Am I showing what I'm thinking on my face? If the cookies aren't the reason, what is it?)
Koremitsu frowned, and asked with his eyes,
"Girls do have their own major issues."
That was such a contentious, ambiguous attitude.
(How am I supposed to understand!? You're making the important parts vague here, and that's really vexing me here!)
But even so, it would be infuriating for Koremitsu to keep asking Hikaru, and even if he did, surely the latter would just let it pass ambiguously.
(Damn it, now my heart's all ruffled.)
Koremitsu gritted his teeth as he watch the sidelong face of Honoka while the latter continued to tap at her messages.

"Go-goo-goo-good morning, Mr. Akagi."

The class representative, Michiru Hanasato, scampered towards Koremitsu like a little animal, and this caused Honoka's shoulders to jerk again.
"Oh, yo."
Koremitsu greeted back. Michiru again flailed her limbs hastily.
"E-erm, we'll be deciding on the committee members for the culture festival in the homeroom meeting later. Eh, erm, I'm wondering, if you like culture festivals."
"…Not at all."
Koremitsu frowned, curtly replying.
How could he, shunned by others, possibly be joining in class activities all merry and such? *A culture festival? What is that? Can it be eaten?* That was probably how it felt to him.
"Eh!?"
Michiru leaned back, looking perturbed.
"Ho-how is that possible…b-but, the culture festival at Heian Academy is held in conjunction with the elementary and middle schools branches. It's really big, and there's a lot of authentic, fancy stuff. You'll definitely like it, Mr Akagi…I think. I-I'll do my best here, so you have to do your best too!"

Michiru's face was flushed red, stammering a few times as she finished her words. Before Koremitsu could reply, she hastily got back to her seat.
(What's she saying?)
Koremitsu tilted his head, wondering, and Hikaru looked on with an understanding look, saying,
"Well, you see, is the culture festival not where couples are formed?"
(Ah, yeah, speaking of which, I did see a few popular guys in middle school making out and walking around the culture festival. They're in the way, so I really had the urge to just kick them.)
Either way, like couples, culture festivals were not a thing for Koremitsu. The correct method to spend a culture festival was to find an empty classroom and stay there until the closing ceremony.
(But—I'm with Hikaru this here. Am I going to hear him ramble about flowers for the entire day?)
Upon thinking about how annoying it would be, Koremitsu had the urge to wish for Hikaru to ascend to the afterlife sooner.
Honoka remained still as she continued to tap her the messages. Perhaps she was updating the blog of the love expert 'Purple Princess'.
Soon after, the homeroom meeting begun, and in the teacher's place, Michiru got to the podium.
"I-I'll be deciding on the committee members for the culture festival."
She hosted the meeting, seemingly unable to calm down.
"Eh, you can recommend yourself or others to be the committee members. If anyone wants someone to do so, please raise your hands."
There was an overwhelming silence from everyone. Surely, anyone involved would be bogged down by the duties of a committee member, and they wouldn't be able to go dating with their lovers.
"Eh, erm…"
After fidgeting for quite a while, Michiru said,
"If nobody has any suggestions, I-I-I do have someone I like to recommend."
"Eh? Isn't that a good thing?"
"You can do so, rep."
"I agree."
The voices this time were lacking in enthusiasm, or certainly, they found it to be a hassle.
Just when Koremitsu was about to feel sympathy for Michiru.
Michiru gave the look of a puppy abandoned in a cardboard box on a rainy day as she stared over at Koremitsu.
"I-In that case…I recommend, Mr Koremitsu Akagi as an executive member of the culture festival."
♢ ♢ ♢
"What were you thinking!? Didn't I say that I have no interest in culture festivals, and I don't like that!"
"Th-that's why, it's my responsibility as the class rep to make you like the culture festival, Mr Akagi!"

Once first period ended.
Koremitsu finally managed to hunt down Michiru, the latter scampering everywhere in fear of his wrath, only to be stuck in a corner of the corridor, and interrogated her. Shivering, Michiru answered Koremitsu.
“A-an-an-and, didn’t you readily accept the task in front of everyone?”
“Yes, you did say ‘please take good care of me here’, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru beamed as he chimed.
(This guy’s~~ so enjoying things now that I’m an executive committee member of the culture festival.)
He did give the salutations, but that was because of Michiru’s sudden nomination. His mind was blank, and for some reason, it was decided he would be the one doing it. He naturally gave the salutations…and even became shrill due to tension.
“Pl-please take care of me.”
And there was silence in the classroom after Koremitsu whispered these words, the only thing the latter remembered vividly was that nobody applauded him. It was a nightmare for him, and he was practically in hot water.
“It-it-it’s fine for you! You’ll be able to overcome all difficulties with your powers as the delinquent king, Mr Akagi!”
“I’M NOT A DELINQUENT!”
“Sorry!!!”
Michiru crouched down, cupping her head.
“Anyway, I never became a class rep, and I have zero participation experience in the culture festival. It’s improbable for me to do this.”
“Ho-how can that be, Mr Akagi…!”
With her eyes looking like an abandoned puppy again.
“What are you doing to Michiru.”
A stiff voice caused Koremitsu to turn around, and he immediately spotted Honoka holding a cellphone with one hand, looking heinous as she stood there.
Perhaps Honoka assumed Koremitsu was grudgeful against Michiru regarding the culture festival, and that Koremitsu was about to exact vengeance.
“I didn’t…”
While Koremitsu tried to explain, Michiru got himself in his way.
“We-we’re just discussing about the culture festival…there’s nothing that’ll make you worry, Hono.”
This was a rare show of insistence from Michiru.
Honoka frowned, her eyes sharpened.
“Is that so…I guess it doesn’t matter then.”
Honoka replied curtly, and tapped at the keypad as she left.
And Michiru seemed to be thinking about something as she watched Honoka leave with a forlorn look.

(What's going on? It feels like there's something different between Shikibu and Hanasato…did they get into an argument or something?)
Speaking of which, he did not see them walking together recently. Before then, Michiru would follow Honoka from behind, calling "Hono, Hono'.
"Did you quarrel with Shikibu? Both of you look really gloomy."
Michiru looked over at Koremitsu timidly,
"If possible, I can help you two out."
If Honoka and Michiru really were on bad terms, Koremitsu would not be able to let the matter rest.
"…No, this is between Hono and me."
Michiru however showed a perturbed look, averting her eyes sadly as she whispered softly,
"I do feel that it doesn't matter what Hono does to me. Bu-but I don't want to give up without doing anything…"
Koremitsu could not understand.
Just when he frowned, Michiru turned towards Koremitsu, and gave him a deep bow.
"Please."
The wavy curls swayed on her petite shoulders like a puppy's tail.
"P-please continue with the culture festival committee work. I-I'll assist you too."
"Hey…"
Koremitsu was puzzled, wondering why Michiru would mention this again. Was the awkward situation between Honoka and Michiru related to this culture festival? Personally, he was not the type to manage as a committee member, and surely the other classmates were unwilling to face such a situation.
However, Michiru continued to lower her head and remain still. With a skeptical look, Hikaru placed his hand on a grumbling Koremitsu's shoulder (?).
"It looks like you have to do it, Koremitsu."
"Uu…l-looks like I got no choice."
And thanks to that, Koremitsu stood in front of all his classmates for the first time in his life of 16 years and few months.
"Hey, we're going to decide what we're going to do during the homeroom meeting tomorrow! You guys better come up with something at least!"
Koremitsu notified in the class during the class meeting after lessons ended, and it caused the atmosphere to freeez over. The students seated in the middle of the third row, whom Koremitsu was glaring at, and they were frantically lowering their heads, not wanting to meet him in the eyes.
Koremitsu himself was feeling nervous, and this caused his face to be more tense than usual. His eyebrows were raised, and his voice sounded like a coercion that intimidated his already faint-hearted classmates.
"Do your best, Koremitsu."

Hikaru beside him was wearing a chouran uniform and a helmet scarf, encouraging Koremitsu and cheering him on; however, this caused Koremitsu to feel dejected.
(Is our class really able to participate in the culture festival?)
No matter how he tried to recall the culture festival in his middle school, Koremitsu ended up with miserable memories.
He, hailed as a delinquent king, was definitely unable to either be cast as an acting role or be a frontline staff member in an eatery. He was the only one not notified of any work to be done after school, and was alone on the day of the culture festival. He wanted to stroll about at his own whim, only to scare away the ghosts acting in the ghost house. When he went to listen to the brass band club perform in the gym, there was an empty circle around him. Once it ended, he met other delinquent gangs who snuck into the culture festival. After fighting a few waves, he finally chased the enemy away, only for rumors that the delinquent king went berserk to run rampant, dyeing the back of the gym bloody. This added on to Koremitsu's already infamous reputation.
(Arrggh, I really don't want to think about it.)
And the black history Koremitsu had with regards to the culture festival caused him much heartbroken, his expression increasingly menacing as a result. This too caused his classmates to start making prayer chants

In the meantime,
"…"
Honoka continued to type messages under the table.

The class meeting finally ended, and Koremitsu dragged his lethargic body to the Japanese Dance Clubroom.
"I heard that you are appointed a culture festival committee member, Mr Akagi?"
The club president Tsuyako grinned radiantly as she said that.
The fiery red hair was tied into a knot draped on a shoulder, and she, dressed in a faint blue kimono, was looking elegant like a spirit of the red weeping cherry blossom, the radiant, pretty lips exemplifying her remarkable looks.
"This culture festival surely feels exciting. I really wish I can be retained for a year so that I can be your classmate, Mr Akagi."
Tsuyako deliberately riled the atmosphere, perhaps having noticed the awkward situation between a scowling Koremitsu, a shivering Michiru and Honoka turning her head again.
"Ahh, too bad however. It was a rarity that I wanted to act in 'Momotaro' or 'The Crab and the Monkey'."
"Why 'Momotaro'? Or 'The Crab and the Monkey'?"
Koremitsu retorted. And Hikaru too pondered seriously,

“If ‘Momotaro’, Koremitsu will be the demon, and Tsuyako will…if it is the ‘Crab and the Monkey’…hm, is Koremitsu going to be the monkey? Then Tsuyako will…”
Honoka and Michiru probably thought of the casting, and both gave gaudy looks.
Tsuayko in turn giggled in a bubbly manner,
“In that case, since that dream cannot be fulfilled, the Japanese Dance Club will be taking part in the culture festival.”
“WHAT!?”
“Tsuyako-senpai, you’re going to dance? ‘Momotaro’?”
“I-I-I don’t have any on stage dancing experience, let alone being your partner, Tsuyako-senpai!”
Tsuyako in turn chuckled,
“I suppose. Ability is something to be accumulated through practice, so we shall perform next year instead. How about we open a shop this year?”
“A shop?”
“Oh? What kind of shop?”
(Something like takoyaki or shaved ice?)
Koremitsu racked his brain for common items he would see in a typical culturre festival shop.
“We shall all decide on this. Which do you prefer? I do want to try all kinds of clothing.”
Tsuyako laid out several copies of pictures on the tatami, giving off the vibe of a fan being waved elegantly with all its fragrance.
And upon seeing that.
“Ack.”
“Wah!”
“T-Tsuyako-senpai!”
Such exclaims could be heard.
“Wow.” Hikaru too widened his eyes as he watched on.
Printed on the copies were Cheongsams with slits on them, fluffy maid outfits, miko outfits, nurse uniforms, armor, and all kinds of cosplay outfits, 12 of them in total!
Tsuyako chimed in excitedly.
“This is my first time partaking in a Japanese Cultures Festival. I had been studying overseas all this while, and I was alone with Hikaru in the clubroom last year, so i did not see anything. Of course, that sort of pasttime had its own benefits, but Hikaru is no longer here this year.”
(What were you two doing alone during the culture festival!!?)
Koremitsu glared furiously at Hikaru, floating in the air.
“Surely, Tsuayko decided to participate in this culture festival to bury the pain of losing me. Right now, she certainly is swallowing her tears and forcing a smile.”
(No no no, she’s just so into this no matter how I look at things.)

“I suppose a Cheongsam is the appropriate choice here, definitely suited for Miss Shikibu with her nice long legs. However, please do try out the miko outfit. The maid uniform here is cute too. There is a miniskirt version, and also the formal long skirt version. Ah, I do admire the maid outfit too.”
“Certainly it will be so lewd and dazzling seeing Tsuyako wearing such a nurse uniform. This Cheongsam will emphasize her elegance. I do want to see Tsuyako and everyone else wear the miko outfit though. Ahh, it really is difficult for me to make a choice between all the clothing here.”
Hikaru excitedly prattled on as he quickly switched into different clothing, from a butler, to a priest garb, and finally, a Cheongsam.
And in the meantime, Koremitsu glared back coldly, having come to the conclusion
(So, senpai’s so into cosplay because of this guy’s influence…)
“Hey, Mr Akagi, which do you prefer?”
“Koremitsu, which do you prefer?”
Tsuyako and Hikaru both looked bubbly as they glanced at Koremitsu.
Michiru’s shoulders jerked slightly, and Honoka continued to lower her head and look down, her lips sealed tightly.
“Even if you ask…”
And while Koremitsu was looking perturbed, Tsuyako added
“How about you decide, Mr Akagi?”
What the!?
“M-M-M-Mr Akagi, if you wish for me to wear something…I’ll summon my courage and open the unknown door…!”
“…”
“You see, Koremitsu, everyone is so expectant here. You have to choose for them.”
Hikaru remained effevescent,
Tsuyako, Michiru and Hikaru were staring intently at him, and Honoka too seemed to be pricking her ears.
“Ugh.”
Don’t I look like a pervert no matter which once I choose? Koremitsu grumbled.
And there was an announcement chime from the speakers above them, followed by a cold, stoic voice echoing,

“Mr Koremitsu Akagi, please head to the student council office immediately.”

“Asa?”
“Ack, Saiga!?”
She suddenly summoned him through the school’s public announcement system. What happened!
“Sorry, I’ll go take a look.”
“Ah, Mr Akagi!”

“That is an abuse of authority, Miss Asai.”
Tsuyako and the rest could be heard from behind. To be honest, this broadcast really saved him there.
(Nice timing! I gotta thank you here, Asa!)
“Koremitsu, you seem really happy…”
Koremitsu quickly got down the corridor, down the stairs, and soon arrived at the student councile office.
“Yo, I’m here.”
“Now that was fast.”
Asai was alone in the room, as usual. Koremitsu himself wondered, Isn’t it better to change the nameplate of the room from the ‘student council office’ to the ‘student council ***president*** *office?*
“Aren’t you the one who asked me to hurry over? What’s the problem? I can do anything for you right now.”
“Anything…?”
“Yeah.”
“…”
Asai frowned hard, pondering about something, and answered,
“I suppose not. I am still not that deplorable to a point where I need you for assistance.”
“You really aren’t being cute here. What do you want?”
He asked, feeling a little vexed. Asai slowly folded her arms, and said haughtily,
“Mr Akagi, I hereby commission you to be part of the culture festival special security group.”

Chapter 2 - Little Bird's Returned Favor?

A culture festival committee member, a shop by the Japanese Dance Club, and the special security team!? How do you expect me to do these three things at once?
During break the following day, Koremitsu grumbled as he walked down the corridor, his eyes despondent.
His face became gloomy as he recalled the conversation he had with Asai in the student council office.

“Special security? What’s that about?”
“It is meant to safeguard against suspicious people like you on the day of the culture festival, and quickly eliminate savage wild hounds like you before they can cause any commotion. This special branch is also meant to bring customers to the places they wish to visit before scary looking delinquents like you do anything to me.”
“Why are you blaming all these commotions on me! And why are you asking me here!?”
“This is because I suppose you, who had always been doing this, know the mentalities and weaknesses of those unruly hoodlums. As they say, fight fire with fire. This is not a ‘request’, but an established ‘notification’. You have no right to deny.”

(~~~~~Ugh, that Asa. I thought she had been a little cuter nowadays, how mistaken was I!? I already have my class and club activities. That’s impossible for me to handle!)
If you refuse, I shall scrap the Japanese Dance Club and forbid your class from participating in the culture festival.”
Asai’s eyes looked extremely serious, and so Koremitsu accepted the task anyway.
Hikaru cheered on enthusiastically while Koremitsu grumbled away,
“Things will be alright when it comes. I had to attend to 7 dates on Christmas, and though I had moments when I thought of giving up, I still managed to attend to them.”
“Don’t associate me with your unrestrained flirting, you bastard!”
Koremitsu accidentally yelled, scaring the students passing by.
“A-ahem.”
And he cringed his head and snorted to hide the awkwardness.
Hikaru chuckled, and his expression became tender,
“But I am as excited now as I was before Christmas Eve came. I did not have much wonderful memories during the culture festival. I was casted as the prince in Cinderella, but there was a ruckus over who got to be

Cinderella, and finally, all the girls in class got to be Cinderella, but I was ostracized by the boys as a result. When we had the folk dance, there was another huge commotion as the girls were crowding me, and I was ostracized by the boys again. The takoyaki I bought was toppled for some reason, and the girls argued again. I was called to the back of the gym by the boys, and the girls immediately rushed over to them, interrogating 'what are you planning to do to Lord Hikaru'?"
"You're bragging about your popular history again. That's a lot better than me who's shunned by the entire class **and can't even touch the class exhibits**"
"That is not the case. There was once when I was ostracized by all the boys and girls in my class. That was when I was in 9th grade…"
Hikaru smiled forlornly.
How's it possible for this guy to be shunned by the girls? Koremitsu was stunned.
And just when Koremitsu was about to ask what it was about.

"Ah…!"

A breath-like mutter grazed by his ears.

(Aoi!)
A pretty, adorable girl with long, black, silk-like hair was standing at a corner of the corridor, looking completely skeptical as she stared at Koremitsu timidly with her large, black, glossy eyes.
She did not turn away to leave immediately, but instead, she went towards Koremitsu when the latter approached her.
And while both were much closer than before, they stopped in their tracks.
(Damn it. Why's my heart pounding like crazy?)
"Ah, erm…are you feeling okay?"
The moment she voiced out, Koremitsu's ears were burning red.
(What am I saying here? We just met.)
Back then however, Koremitsu did not have the courage to meet Aoi directly. Also, he was concerned about how Hikaru would be looking at him, and thus, he merely said 'thanks' and 'sorry to make you worry about me'.
After meeting Aoi that day, he met his mother near his house, bringing a boy along.
While Koremitsu continued to cry and force a smile, it was Aoi who held his held, and continued to do so even after his mother bowed and left.
The one woman Koremitsu should be protecting in Hikaru's stead, the most precious woman to Hikaru, reversed the situation by supporting Koremitsu.
This was so embarrassing to Koremitsu his face seared.
Aoi's fingers were so slender, so delicate, yet they filled Koremitsu's heart with determination and tenderness. Till this point, Koremitsu still continued to recall the feeling on the fingers, and in his palm.

Back then, he was out of character.
Surely it was Hikaru's fault for those strange words that he became so concerned about it.
And at this point, his mind would sear whenever he faced Aoi, and he would panic.
"Erm."
Aoi too looked tensed as she lifted her face at him, and though she finally summoned her courage to say those words, her voice got increasingly softer.
"I am fine."
And her face was blushing.
"Th-that's good."
Koremitsu stammered. Aoi again summoned her courage, asking,
"It looks like you became a committee member of the culture festival planning."
"Eh, ahh…I guess you heard of it."
"I heard your classmates mention it."
Aoi answered bashfully, her black, glossy eyes giving off a glint of tenderness.
"Surely your classmates understand how reliable you are, Mr. Akagi."
(No…that's not really the case.)
But Koremitsu could not bring himself to deny this after seeing Aoi look so elated, and he felt itchy within.
"Break time is almost over…that's all, I guess."
"Yes. Erm…see you later."
"Y-yeah."
Will they really meet again? Or would she contact him by messages?
Koremitsu really could not understand what Aoi was thinking.
And upon seeing Koremitsu's clumsiness, Aoi let out a sigh of relief, smiling brightly. She then nodded, and left.
"Koremitsu."
Hikaru's voice came from the side, seemingly summoning an audience with Koremitsu.
"Ah damn it. Class meeting's up next. Got to decide what we're going to do for the culture festival. Can we do it well?"
Koremitsu raised his voice, wanting to avoid the topic, fearing that Hikaru would say such strange things again.
"I don't have time to think about any other stuff with this on my mind now."
He continued forward, making sure not to look in Hikaru's direction.

(I really don't have the time to think about it. The culture festival itself is driving me crazy.)
Koremitsu defended himself in his heart as he returned to the classroom.
He met Honoka in the eyes, but the latter immediately looked away.
"…"

Besides Honoka, the other students enjoying their break tensed up and averted their eyes from Koremitsu, remaining silent.
It appeared that time was rewinded back to May, when Koremitsu first entered the classroom.
Recently, everyone in class was beginning to adapt to the existence of a wild dog that did not fit in with the rest, and gradually reacted less dramatically in response to his actions. They however began to do so again, and cringed their heads whenever they heard Koremitsu drag his chair.
They were all seated way before the bell chimed, and Michiru was the only one looking at Koremitsu worriedly.
(Am I seriously able to be a committee member?)
Koremitsu was angsty with regards to this outlook, cold sweat trickling down his armpits.
“Hm? What’s this?”
There was a brown envelope the size of a notebook, placed at Koremitsu’s table, one he had never seen before. It contained a few pieces of printed papers, and the recipient ‘Koremitsu Akagi’ was written on the envelope. There was no sender written on the back, but there was a little picture.
“It is a bird, is it not…?”
Hikaru, peering from the side, whispered.
Yes, it was the drawing of a bird. Though the lines looked simple enough to pass off as a drawing of an elementary school student, there was no doubt it was a bird.
(Why a bird?)
Koremitsu did receive letters of challenges and other strange messages in his shoe locker. This probably was a similar kind of prank.
He drew out a piece of paper from the envelope, and stared at it,

“Class 1-1. Kimono Cafe.
Class 1-2. Musical drama: Lord Hikaru and the Thousand Roses.
Class 1-3. Floral Exhibition.
Class 1-4. Our Lord Hikaru’s Exhibition.”

(What’s this? What’s with the ‘Lord Hikaru and the Thousand Roses.’ and Our Lord Hikaru’s Exhibition’?)
“Koremitsu, this looks like the events the other classes will be having. All the investigation is done; wow, even the clubs exhibits too.”
Hikaru hollered excitedly,
“This information is amazing. With such information, we have something to talk about in the class meeting.”
“Ah, sure.”
Koremitsu replied blankly. It certainly did not seem to be a prank, but rather, an assistance from a kind person.
(But who’ll do such a thing,,,?)

Koremitsu sensed a stare from sidelong, and turned to meet Honoka in the eyes.
The latter was taken aback, and immediately pouted her lips, turning her head away.
The feisty sidelong face was dyed red.
(Did Shikibu do it?)
The teacher had yet to arrive, and homeroom period began.
Holding the papers in hand, Koremitsu got up to the podium. Michiru too stood beside Koremitsu anxiously, telling him with her eyes 'it's okay'. On the other side, Hikaru drifted about leisurely, wearing the same chouran uniform and helmet scarf, dressed like a cheerleader, telling him 'you can do it, Koremitsu'.
(Well, I guess it's better than wearing a cheerleader girl's uniform.)
Koremitsu pondered with exceptional calmness.
"As announced yesterday, we're going to decide on the exhibits to be shown for the culture festival. I'll first announce what the other classes plan to do as reference, so I hope you guys will give some suggestions."
His body tense due to anxiety, his voice however was more fluent than the previous day, and he did not bite his tongue or make any meaningless grumbles.
It seemed everyone was listening attentively as Koremitsu announced the items on the list to ease the tense atmosphere in the classroom. Perhaps everyone was amazed that a bonafide delinquent would actually do some reason, and there was a slight change in their stares towards him.
Honoka continued to lower her head and look at the cell phone under her table, but it was obvious she was not doing anything to it.
"—That's all. I suppose everyone has noticed that there's a lot of themes relating to 'Lord Hikaru'. We can follow suit…"
"How about you do a timeline of me? I can provide photos of myself from young till now. That will be really popular!"
Hikaru said with such unabashedness.
"But I do think a different theme's good too. It'll be easy to clash if everyone's doing the same things."
"I am disappoint, Koremitsu."
Koremitsu decided to ignore Hikaru, who had his shoulders drooped.
Michiru mentioned timidly,
"But a haunted house and a cafe is very common too."
"We'll just think of some new ideas. Anyway, say what you want to do, guys."
Silence again descended upon the classroom, and his classmates invariably lowered their heads.
"Yo, student number 10!"
"WAH!"
There was a boy seated in the middle of the 3rd row from the front, and he suddenly got to his feet.

“What do you want to do?”
“Er-erm, dango…?”
“A dango shop, huh? Write it down, Hanasato.”
“Y-yes!”
“Student number 23! What about you!?”
“Hii! Erm, s-sh-sh-shaved ice!”
“Okay, next! Student number 15!”
“Arrghh!!!!”
Whenever Koremitsu called out the student numbers with that terrifying voice, shrieked of agony echoed throughout the classroom. Koremitsu looked around, and the voices would hastily answer ‘haunted house’ or ‘butler cafe’, trying their best to escape from Koremitsu’s glares as soon as possible.
“W-w-wait a sec! I-I-I’m still writing! Eh, erm!”
A panicking Michiru’s writing speed could not keep up with Koremitsu.
“It’s a Yukata cafe.”
Koremitsu snatched the chalk, and scribbled a few words on the blackboard.
Michiru widened her mouth in astonishment as she looked up, and the classmates watched Koremitsu’s abnormally pretty words in unison with amazement.
Hikaru beamed.
“Now then, that should be enough. Let’s vote on this.”
Koremitsu slammed his hand on the blackboard, hollering.
And it was 5 minutes before the homeroom meeting ended when they decided the exhibit Koremitsu’s class was to showcase, ‘Supernatural! Home of the vengeful spirit!’

“You’re amazing, Mr. Akagi! That quick action was really amazing! You really are a capable delinquent, Mr. Akagi! Always hiding your talents!”
“…You don’t intend to change the delinquent part, do you?”
It was lunch break, and Koremitsu, having passed the first obstacle, was overwhelmed with fatigue as he laid prone on the chair. Right in front of him was Michiru, exclaiming that he was amazing over and over again.
Hikaru too seemed delighted,
“That really was cool, Koremitsu. The way you called out everyone by their student numbers without any room for rejection feels like a ruthless, demonic sergeant, it was mesmerizing. The ‘Yukata Cafe’ you wrote on the blackboard too caused everyone to widen their eyes and marvel. It really is wonderful and cool that a ‘Yukata Cafe’ has so many strokes in them; I suppose there is not much effect if it had been a ‘Maid Cafe’ instead. Even the heavens’ luck is on your side.”
And Hikaru patted Koremitsu on the back as he said this, but even so, his hand was merely sinking into the latter’s body.
Blushing, Michiru looked up at Koremitsu.

“Speaking of which, when did you begin to investigate the exhibits of the other classes, Mr. Akagi?”
“It wasn’t me.”
Honoka looked extremely despondent as she tapped at the keys. She could hear the conversation between them, but she continued to ignore them.
Concerned about Honoka’s actions, Koremitsu curtly mentioned,
“That wasn’t done by me. Some kind person put it in my table.”
“Eh, y-you don’t have to be so humble, Mr. Akagi”
It seemed Michiru did not know how to respond to some special person actually being kind to Koremitsu.
Koremitsu pouted, glancing aside at Honoka.
(Did…Shikibu do it after all?)

◇ ◇ ◇
After that, the envelops with little bird pictures on them continued to be sent to Koremitsu's table drawer.
There was all kinds of information, containing the schedule until the closing ceremony of the culture festival, the list of request forms the student council received, the information with regards to monsters, how to assemble mazes,shopping lists, and even a list of cheap shopping outlets.
"Amazing. You really know everything, Mr. Akagi."
Whenever Michiru blushed and looked impressed with Koremitsu, the latter would curtly deny it, and look towards Honoka.
"This isn't done by me."
Honoka continued to scowl and tap at the messages. Michiru however was further convinced that Koremitsu was bashful.
"Erm..yes, I understand how you feel.'
And after seeing her nod away shyly, Koremitsu felt that he could not get through to her.
(I really didn't do it though.)
It was after school, and Koremitsu complained to Hikaru in the empty classroom as sunset shone in.
"Right now, it appears that Miss Hanasato will probably clap and say something 'Sorry about that, Mr. Akagi. I shall arrange the table' if you are to flip the table and cause a ruckus."
"Don't mention it…can the guy sending the messages hurry up and tell me who he is? Why's the only thing drawn a bird?"
Koremitsu felt that he was being taunted, and felt extremely jumpy, unable to calm down. While he continued to complain with an increasingly sharp glare, Hikaru calmly mentioned,
"Was there not an additional line added recently?"
"Ugh, I really don't understand what you mean."
Koremitsu curled his lips,
"Rainy night."
That was the first line attached to the side of the little bird.

"Hey, what does the rainy night mean? It's sunny today and yesterday."
"Hm, a handle name?"

It was after school when Koremitsu and Hikaru had such a conversation, and there was another envelope with a little bird on it, with the words **"The encounter with a friend on it."**

"You sure that's a handle name?"
"Eh, perhaps it is a code name. Like a treasure appearing on a rainy day, when friends meet."
"This isn't some fantasy story! Be serious!"

The next envelope that was sent had the words “Unfinished Journey on it.”, followed by “Rainy night.” and “Jade Piercing Moon.”…the recent one was “Meeting the little sister.”
“All these do contain elegant words, but what are they trying to convey to us?”
Hikaru placed his hand under his chin, pondering.
“The only thing that hasn’t changed is the picture of the bird.”
“Ah, I see.”
“What!”
“Koremitsu, did you help a hurt bird before? That bird may be repaying you for your kindness.”
“Did I!?”
Koremitsu yelled while raising his eyebrows, and Hikaru cackled away mischievously.
“I am merely joking. Surely it is a girl who likes you wanting to help you, Koremitsu. For example, there is that feisty, worrisome girl who is like a Heliotrope.”
Hikaru gave Koremitsu a wink, causing the latter to blush.
Did Hikaru too think it was Honoka?
(I guess…Shikibu’s the only strange one who’ll help me out…if it’s Shikibu, she can just stuff the envelope easily into the next table…)
Koremitsu inadvertently reminiscence the itch had he first had. Hikaru beside him was dyed red, his eyes melancholic as he whispered,
“Speaking of which, when I was shunned by the girls in my class, I was helped by this Little White Flower.”
“Little White Flower?”
While Koremitsu was wondering if Hikaru was going to narrate his history as a popular boy again, the latter recounted with his richly sweet voice.
“There was a Cupid in the backyard of the Middle School Campus, and it was said that couples could be together forever as long as they made an oath in front of it. During the culture festival in my 3rd grade, I made flower rings for 5 girls, and swore oaths of love with them.”
“Huh? 5?”
“Yes.”
“Why did you make oaths with 5 girls at once!? Didn’t you say you spent time with 5 girls on the culture festival too!?”
“But you see, is the culture festival and sports festival not a time when emotions get tempest, and do they not wish to confess? With girls asking me out saying, ‘I have something to say to you in front of the Cupid Statue. Please come’, do I not have to fulfill the promise?”
(THIS GUY~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!!!!!!!)
Surely it would not be a strange sight for Hikaru, who dated 7 girls on Christmas Eve, to receive confessions from 5 girls in a day. Koremitsu however never expected that the boy would actually agree to them.
(This guy’s a harem prince since you. A really annoying brat!)

“I do remember back then, it was the season when the Cosmos and Dianthus flowers were in bloom. I plucked them, tied the stems into a circle and formed a ring. I then gently raised the hand of the girl, and slotted the ring into her finger, telling her ‘I do love you too, Erina’.”
“…So, starting from Erina, you received confessions from Yumi, Misaki, Sayaka or something like every hour?”
“Yes, that certainly seemed like it.”
“Stop admitting that with a smile!!!”
Koremitsu yelled, and Hikaru got dejected,
“Everyone was really happy. However, the fact that I gave rings to 5 girls was quickly revealed.”
The girls, absolutely elated thinking that they were the only ones who made promises of love with Hikaru, were naturally furious. They then complained to the other girls, saying Hikaru was ‘terrible’. As a result, Hikaru was isolated from not only the boys, but also the girls too.
“That truly was a tragedy. Before then, I had assumed that the girls would surely stand by me no matter what happened.”
“That’s your just desserts.”
Koremitsu concluded with a harsh face.
“But on those days of suffering, there was someone encouraging me every day, even returning me my stolen recorder and drawing instruments.”
Hikaru narrowed his eyes, his expression showing life again.
“Someone actually helped you? That’s a strange one.”
It appeared Hikaru paid no heed to Koremitsu’s spiteful words as a sweet smile appeared on his face.
“That person would always fold papers into a flower of 5 petals and slip the into my drawer or shoe locker. That was when I placed a letter with the words ‘To Little White Flower’ in it. It was soon taken away. During the 3 days before I was forgiven by the other girls, I had a dreamy conversation with that person…”
“They forgave you after 3 days!? Those girls are too soft-hearted.”
“It seemed they could not handle ignoring me for so longer. After that, there was a promise made during the class meeting that Lord Hikaru belongs to everyone, and that taking a head start was forbidden.”
“Are you serious!?”
Koremitsu lost all strange to retort as he shrugged. Hikaru beside him however spoke with a sickeningly sweet expression.
“I wrote down ‘can you be my flower’, and the reply I had from Little white Flower was ‘Okay’. That became our final conversation however…ever since then, the messages with the white 5-petaled flower never appeared in my shoe locker again.”
The angelic lips betrayed a sweet, tender smile. Surely, if any girl was to see it, they would be utterly mesmerized.
But Koremitsu maintained a bitter look, saying,
“Hey, are you asking me to find out who made that promise with you?”

“I will not.”
This time, Hikaru smiled so innocently.
“A love where we cannot meet is wonderful too. There is the memory of prettier, fragrant flower, and one will be wondering without being hindered what kind of person she was? Is it a face of a Galanthus popping out from the snow, the poignant White Camellia blooming in the winter cold, or is it the pure white Acacia that scatters its petals in the beginning of summer?”
How much does this guy love flowers and women? Koremitsu was flabbergasted, and turned to the seat beside him.
It was empty…but his mind recalled the profile of Honoka staring at the cellphone screen seriously, sliding her fingers up and down, and his heart ached again.
(Damn it. If you’re the ‘bird’, let me thank you at least.)

The following day, Koremisu decided to question Honoka. His heart had been giddy all this while, unbearable.
“Shikibu.”
Once break time came, Koremitsu got up from her seat and spoke to Honoka.
“Ah, Sayuki.”
However, Honoka got up earlier, and quickly shook off Koremitsu as she head off towards another classmate.
“I can go for the group date later.”
“Great! There’ll be more guys joining if you’re joining, Honoa.”
“Do I invite Hori? She just broke up with her boyfriend, and is looking for a new one okay.”
“Okay.”
“Horriii!! After school!!”
Honoka was surrounded by a lot of girls, and Koremitsu felt like a dog barking away.
It had been like this unlike school ended. Once homeroom ended, the girls would surround Honoka, enthusiastically leaving the classroom.
And Koremitsu could only place at hand on his face, watching her leave.
“Is the bird really Shikibu?”
Koremitsu had such a doubt upon seeing Honoka’s attitude, asking with a dejected voice.
“Hm…”
Hikaru too weakly muttered,
(Argh, I don’t care about Shikibu now.)

“M-M-Mr. Akagi!? Why are you angry!? Did I do something wrong!? I’m sorry!”
It was after school.

Koremitsu and Michiru were alone in the classroom, and they were seated at the same table, facing each other, going over the details of the haunted house. Michiru was pale, shivering.
“I’m not angry. I’m just born with this brooding face.”
In fact, Koremitsu was fuming because Honoka had been ignoring him. It was peeving that Honoka was chatting with other girls, but what infuriated him further was that he could only watch her and grovel about.
(Shikibu’s not my personal consultant, and she’s not the one who’s in-charge of helping me. She has her own relationships with other people. For some reason, whenever I feel troubled, I just expect Shikibu’s encouragement and help to come.)
That was supposed to be the case, he was furious that Honoka merely ignored him and went on a group date with other girls. Even if he was shameless, there had to be a limit to it.
(Hikaru did say that Shikibu’s a pretty girl, has a nice figure, and will take care of others. She’s popular amongst the guys and girls. All the incidents I had with her were just unique situations.)
Koremitsu tried to convince himself, but his face tensed when he saw Honoka frolicking around with others with her back facing him, and he gritted his teeth.
(I’m really close-minded.)
He was apologetic for scaring Michiru too.
“Sorry.”
Koremitsu placed his hands on the table, lowering his head to apologize.
He would feel uneasy whenever he was apologizing, or apologized to. Ever since he got over the memory of his mother leaving house however, he did not feel so constrained and suffocated apologizing to others.
He had to apologize for those he had to. Only then was he able to convey his feelings to the other party.
“…Mr. Akagi.”
Michiru’s eyes widened. Also, she flailed her hands.
“I-it’s fine. You’re not angry here, Mr. Akagi. Eheheh, thank goodness. Really.”
She smiled.
It was not a radiant smile at all. However, it was a plain, refreshing smile, and Koremitsu heart fluttered.
“Miss Hanasato’s smile really is amazing, is it not?”
Hikaru muttered, and Koremitsu nodded.
(Y-yeah.)
She beamed away, apparently wanting to cheer on Koremitsu with all her might,
“This is the cast for the monsters. We got the materials here, and we submitted the request form to the student council. All that is left is the maze and the construction of the clothes. It really is going successfully thanks to you, Mr. Akagi.”

(Successful, huh?)
Koremitsu inadvertently began to suspect.
(It's true that we didn't get into any trouble, and things are proceeding as planned on the schedule…is the preparation work for a school festival really like this? Isn't this more like more people working together, everything all bustling?)
Leaving aside the ghost Hikaru, Michiru and Koremitsu were the only ones in the classroom. All the details till this point were handled and prepared by the duo.
The classmates too had the attitude of leaving things to Koremitsu, but it was not because they trusted him, but that they were shying away from him, not wanting to get involved with him…
"A culture festival…should involve the entire class, right?"
Koremitsu grumbled softly, "eh?" and Michiru called out in surprise,
"Isn't it just you and me taking part, Hanasato? Don't you find it strange?"
He asked with a serious face. Michiru however looked perturbed, fidgeting a while before saying,
"Eh, everyone has their own things to handle…it's common for such things to happen as a class rep, so it's not really strange, right? I'm used to doing things alone…"
Michiru had her head lowered as she cautiously narrated, yet to Koremitsu, she looked so forlorn, and it caused his heart to be ostensibly stabbed.
(Speaking of which, isn't there something strange between this girl and Shikibu? Shikibu's been hanging out with other girls, and this girl's always alone. She's even coming to me to have lunch together…)
And Koremitsu's group was isolated from the girls in the class.
(Is it because this girl's shunned for being with me? Unlike Shikibu who has many friends, this girl's like me, not really the kind to handle other human relationships.)
As he wondered about these probable things, Koremitsu's head froze.
"Hanasato, you don't have to accompany me all the time. Don't you have your own stuff too? You…got to patch things up with Shikibu too."
Perhaps it was Koremitsu just worrying too much, for he did not have the right to talk about it, him being shunned by Honoka himself.
Michiru looked increasingly perplexed, and she lowered her head for a while, whispering,
"…Mr. Akagi…is there something…from the bird envelop?"
"Eh? Y-yeah."
Koremitsu had assumed Michiru would be using it as excuse to hide the awkwardness caused by him, but it seemed that was not the case.
And while Koremitsu remained perplexed over the sudden change in topic, Michiru continued,
"Why didn't she just admit it?"
Michiru looked ready to break into tears.
"It's despicable…to remain anonymous."

Perhaps Michiru too did assume that Honoka was the sender behind all these messages. Koremitsu remained silent as he watched Michiru lower her head and frown, her lips quivering, looking tragic.
Hikaru too stared at Michiru with melancholy.
What can I say here? The moment Koremitsu was about to say something, Michiru lifted her head, wanting to pass it off with a laugh.
“Aha…ahaha, sorry for saying such strange things. Thank you for worrying about Hono and me, Mr. Akagi, but we aren’t arguing. It isn’t what you think…erm…anyway, it’s fine. Instead of that, let’s have some baked sweets.”
Michiru hurriedly took out a blue box from her bag, ostensibly remembering it.
“Erm, let’s see…ahh! Mr Akagi, do you mind sitting here?”
Michiru suddenly became lively as she pulled the chair to the windowside.
“Huh? Can’t I sit here?”
“It-it’s brighter here.”
“There are a lot of particulars girls are concerned with, Koremitsu. Especially when they are giving others their home-made snacks.”
Hikaru cheerfully noted.
(What’s that about?)
Was there any particular etiquette in eating by the windowside? Koremitsu could not understand at all.
However, Michiru, seated by the windowside, was staring back with puppy eyes, and Koremitsu could only stand up, get over, and sit down on the chair.
“Is this good enough?”
Michiru’s face was completely flushed, and she nodded.
(Speaking of which, the sun’s too bright here. It’s too direct and hot here!)
This light was not only dazzling, it was baking Koremitsu’s head. However, Michiru looked completely flushed, her face like the setting sun as she said,
“It-it’s better to button up that one, I think.”
And to satisfy Michiru’s wish, Koremitsu buttoned up the first button, which he normally would never do.
“P-please straighten your back too…”
And he subconsciously straightened his back too.
“And.”
“There’s still more!?’
Koremitsu raised his voice, half-scaring her,
“P-please be gentler in the way you speaking…”
“Ugh.”
Koremitsu shut his mouth, and Michiru’s eyes looked mesmerized.
“A dreamy Miss Hanasato really is cool. Right now, you surely must be a prince to her.”
Hikaru teased.

“Hey, Koremitsu. Your back is arched again. You are a prince now; how can you not arch your back? Ahh, don’t raise your leg. Put your legs down.”
(Who’s the prince?)
Koremitsu resisted the urge to raise his eyebrows and lash out.
Michiru looked absolutely elated. There was a lot of trouble caused for her for this culture festival and thus, he decided to play along with her ‘etiquette’ for the time being.
(But it’s still so bright. It’s so hot. My throat’s so dry, it’s crying.)
Michiru looked completely blissful as she looked up at Koremitsu, and she opened the blue box, handing it to him,
“P-please have some, Mr. Akagi.”
The pastel colored macarons were neatly arranged in the box.
Koremitsu, intolerant against sweets, hesitated, but Michiru’s eyes were filled with expectations. Hikaru cheered on from the side “do you best, prince.”
“O-okay.”
And Koremitsu reached his hand out.
Trying his best not to feel the smell of the yellow macaron, Koremitsu held his breath. It was crushed the instant it touched Koremitsu’s teeth, and something sticky was stuck on his tongue.
(Ugh, it’s sweet…)
The sickeningly sweet fluid spread in Koremitsu’s mouth, and he felt his mind slammed hard by a hammer.
“H-how is it?”
“Ah…uu, it’s very sweet, on the outside, and the inside too.”
It seemed Michiru deemed Koremitsu’s words as a praise as her cheeks became increasingly illuminated.
“It’s honey macarons. There’s honey added in the skin too.”
“Wow. This really looks good. I want to try some too.”
(You damned ghost! I really want to stuff this entire box into your mouth.)
“Mr. Akagi! There’s still a lot! Please have some more!”
(What!?)
A single macaron alone caused Koremitsu much numbing damage, so the thought of finishing up everything in the box caused Koremitsu to be so despondent.
“I really don’t eat a lot of sweets here…”
Koremitsu instead tried another way of hinting to Michiru that he could not take sweets.
“Eh?”
But Michiru lowered her eyes, looking ready to break into tears. This caused Koremitsu to feel like he was bullying a small animal.
“Uggh, I’ll have another one then.”
And Koremitsu stuffed another orange piece into his mouth.
It was so sweet his teeth were melting.
“You really are a prince, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru changed into a frilly costume of the middle ages as he floated leisurely above Koremitsu, taunting Koremitsu enough to unleash some murderous intent. At the same time, Michiru pushed the box towards Koremitsu,
“This orange one is a combination of Acacia honey and White Chocolate.”
At that moment, Koremitsu shivered.
He snatched the box from Michiru’s hands, and got up.
“It’s really nice! Let’s share it with everyone! Senpai wants me to show up at the Dance club! I’ll end up rising to heaven if I’m to eat all these alone!”
♢ ♢ ♢
—*If it is what you wish…* the little forlorn emotion Michiru showed caused Koremitsu to feel guilty as he arrived at the Japanese Dance Club, only to be surprised finding Aoi there.
“H-hello there, Mr. Akagi.”
Aoi nodded, her fingertips resting against the tatami. Her cheeks were dyed red, her long, black hair draped on the shoulders, wrapped around her slender body. As a princess, surely this was an etiquette she was trained to do since young, but unlike Tsuyako’s alluring, pretty actions, Aoi’s actions were overflowing with cuteness.
“Miss Aoi wishes to help up in our shop during the culture festival.”
“Wha—”
He let out a startled voice, and Hikaru too widened his eyes.
“Hey! Senpai! Isn’t the exhibit for the Dance Club that—!?”
“A juice stand of Nurses! Was that not because you chose it, Mr. Akagi!”
There was an elegance filling the room as Tsuyako said those words.
“Isn’t that because you just flipped the papers around and asked me to choose one!? It’s not like I like nurses!”
“Of course. You really had a hard choice choosing, Mr. Akagi, whether it is the miko outfit of the Cheongsam.”
“I didn’t!”
And Aoi was blushing as she heard the volleys between Koremitsu and Tsuyako.
Koremitsu then anxiously leaned towards Aoi.
“You just mentioned that theme, senpai! I’m not a sucker for nurses!”
“E-ehhh!”
Aoi’s face got increasingly red, and she fidgeted.
“Anyway, Aoi, are you serious? You have to wear nurse uniforms that day, you know?”
“Y-yes, I did hear about that. Miss Tsuyako did show me information about the clothing. That’s…a-acceptable, I guess…”
“It is!?”
“Yes.”
While he expected Hikaru to actually stop her,
“Miss Aoi in a nurse uniform will be really cute. A white angel~!”
Contrasting his expectations, Hikaru was marvelling away.

And at this moment, a cheerful voice rang,
“Coming through! Hiina Oumi of the news club is here!”
A petite, busty girl with a short haircut appeared, filled with enthusiasm.
“Oumi!? Don’t tell me you’re going to be wearing a nurse uniform too!?”
Hiina’s breasts and meaty thighs were already so big, wearing the uniform alone would have greatly emphasized them. If she was to wear a nurse uniform, surely there would be trouble.
And in a teasing manner, Hiina looked up from below Koremitsu.
“Uh huh? Are you looking forward to me in a nurse uniform, Mr. Akagi! I’m hear to get materials for a special scoop before the culture festival begins, but if you request for it, I’ll be okay with a doctor’s play!”
“Wow, Koremitsu! Hurry up and ask her! I really want to see Miss Oumi in a nurse uniform!”
And Hikaru was pleading with such zest.
(You, shut up already!)
“Of course, you can choose between a Cheongsam or a black suit.”
Hiina said as she leaned her chest over, her shirt unbuttoned down to the second. Her actions were so different from the wise self when there was the commotion about Sora’s pregnancy, so Koremitsu was left perturbed.
Though he believed her flaunting appearance defied the down-to-earth personality within, he still could not accept her alluring him with everyone looking.
“Don’t do this.”
Koremitsu pushed Hiina aside gently.
“That is right. Th-that is shameless.”
And Aoi, seated on the tatami as she knelt down, said so unhappily. Her face was flushed red, and she lowered it.
“Oh my, are you jealous, Your Highness Aoi?”
“!”
Aoi’s face got increasingly red. Tsuyako too continued to strike the iron while it was hot.
“Yes, Miss Aoi is a vat of jealousy. Whenever I was with Hikaru, Miss Aoi would glare at me with her cheeks puffed. She really is innocent and cute, and I really wanted to make her more jealous then before.”
“I-I am not…a vat of jealousy.”
“Enough already, all of you!”
Once Koremitsu let out this violent roar, Tsuyako chortled.
“Sorry. I am afraid of making Miss Aoi hate me more. I shall be more careful.”
“I’ll focus on getting material then.”
Hiina too nonchalantly mentioned this.
“You have to promote this well and lure the customers.”
“Ah, in that case, please give me some photos. Surely there’ll be a long line of customers if there’s a photo of the Moon Matriach in a nurse uniform.”

“Ah, but if all of it is seen from the beginning, there’s no fun in that. I shall only reveal a little here and give the customers some expectations.”
“I see. How about I publish news of the nurse uniform, and that the Moon Matriach will be wearing it on that day?”
“That is fine.”
Tsuyako and Hiina seemed to have caught on the same wavelength as they enjoyed themselves.
And Aoi cringed back shyly, turning her face towards Koremitsu. Once their eyes met, she frantically lowered her head again.
As a result of that, Koremitsu felt his heart race, and he lowered his voice, asking,
“Are you seriously going to help out at the Japanese Dance Club stall?”
“Will I cause trouble?”
“No. Senpai’s been complaining about a lack of people.”
“Mr. Akagi…”
“Eh.”
“No, it is nothing. I…I just want to help.”
“I-Is that so.”
Hikaru too watched Aoi and Koremitsu slightly from the side. This caused Koremitsu much anxiety, his heart tingling.
Suddenly, he realized he forgot about Michiru, and immediately turned back.
(Damn it!)
Michiru was holding her bag, squatted quietly on the tatami, her head lowered. That lonely, forlorn look caused Koremitsu much heartbreak within. He understood that while most would be cheerful and cause a ruckus, she would be unable to join in, and was unable to endure this loneliness.
(I pulled you here, and I left you aside. Sorry about that, Hanasato.)
Koremitsu hastily raised his voice, saying,
“Ah, Hanasato made some sweets, called macarons or something.”
“I , myself, like macarons.”
“Macarons are like a field of flowers in a childhood world. Let me have a look, Miss Hanasato. My, how cute. Nicely made.”
Hiina and Tsuyako immediately squealed with joy upon seeing Michiru’s macarons.
Aoi looked conflicted, but she too whispered,
“…How cute.”
It seemed that the vibrant colored sweets, no different from poison to Koremitsu, was a magical-like food that would render girls flabbergasted.
The trio grabbed the orange and pink macarons, popping them into their mouths.
“How delicious, Miss Hanasato. Is this honey? It really is wonderful.”
“Ah, so sweet, so wonderful.”

“It really is delicious…erm, do you mind telling me the recipe for this orange one with white chocolate?”
Things suddenly got lively around Michiru.
And her expression too brightened slowly, before she answered flusteredly, “Ah-erm, that recipe is…”
“Miss Hanasato’s macarons really are delicious. Your method of eating really was too intense, Koremitsu. I thought it would merely look good outside, and filled with sugar blocks inside. It really is great to have everyone taste it.”
Hikaru chimed in cheerfully.
Koremitsu too felt relieved seeing Michiru look over at him in such a worrisome, yet cheerful look.
And the box of macarons was soon empty.
“I’ll follow you for materials during the culture festival then, Mr. Akagi.”
Hiina said this before she left the club room.
“I ate a lot. I have to practice to expend the calories.”
After hearing Tsuyako’s words, Koremitsu’s group too left the club room.
“I-I’ll be headed this way.”
Once they got out of the school gates, Michiru bid farewell.”
“Okay. We’ll start designing the maze for the haunted house tomorrow.”
“Thank you very much for your macarons, and for telling me the recipe too.”
Aoi politely bowed towards Michiru, and the latter frantically flailed her hands, saying,
“N-no need for that.”
She looked extremely bashful, her face flushed as she continued to bow back over and over again before she left.
October was beginning, and the sun was setting much earlier than before.
Koremitsu and Aoi were walking side by side down the dim alley.
(Damn it…now we’re alone together.)
Before summer vacation ended, Aoi gave up on taking the bus to school every day, and instead had her family chauffeur ferry her…that should have been the case, for she remained silent as she continued to walk silently and bashfully beside him.
With a tender look, Hikaru stared at Aoi.
“…”
(Got to find something to talk about. This is awkward…)
Koremitsu clumsily opened his mouth,
“Well, about today…I was really shocked. Didn’t you hate senpai, Aoi? You decided to help out with the Dance Club though.”
Aoi too timidly answered,
“I still have some reservations…but I can understand Miss Tsuyako’s charms that attracted even Hikaru…it will be too immature for me to have such reservations.”
Aoi cringed her shoulders and lowered her head, seemingly perplexed as she chimed.

It seemed she was really impressed by how Tsuyako was able to honestly provide a baby cot and diapers during the commotion that was Sora's pregnancy. Tsuyako's actions showed no jealousy towards a woman who bore Hikaru's child, and neither was she holding in any anguish. She was simply thrilled to see that Hikaru's child would be born.
Though it was a misunderstanding, Koremitsu was still relieved that Aoi could let go of her hatred towards Tsuyako.
And surely, Hikaru too would have been relieved about it.
"Also…I never was able to enjoy the school festival with Hikaru."
Koremitsu inadvertently shivered, his heart seemingly shaken by something close.
Aoi, who had her face lowered all this time, showed haze in her eyes.
"Hikaru had so many vibrant people like Miss Tsuyako around him…and I could not be honest as a result."
Why did Aoi choose this moment, of all times, to reminiscence about Hikaru with such a helpless look?
Koremitsu was again shaken by Aoi, and Hikaru beside him was watching her silently with a tragic face. The former's heart raced, and something buried deep within his heart seemed to have been stabbed through.
The sky gradually darkened, and a faint glint lit the roads. Their shadows were shown on the floor, except for Hikaru's.
However, Hikaru was present, his expression forlorn as he listened to Aoi's words.
"As Miss Tsuyako had said…I was often jealous like a child…that was why I was unable to convey my true thoughts to Hikaru…th-that is why…I wish to change. If I can have a happy culture festival this year…that was what I thought."
While she looked ready to break into tears, Aoi turned around, saying, "Sorry, I shall stop here."
A black sedan silently arrived, and parked beside Aoi. Surely it had been tailing Koremitsu.
The chauffeur opened the doors.
"Bye then, Mr. Akagi."
With a soft voice, Aoi said, and her long black hair swayed as she vanished behind the door.
Soon after, the car Aoi rode on vanished at the end of the dim path.
Both Koremitsu and Hikaru watched the car leave silently.
After some itching silence, Hikaru sputtered, his eyes melancholic,
"…The culture festival. Back then, Miss Aoi, she merely glared at me. She would not approach me…whether it was in Middle School…or whenever I was alive. During the last culture festival she had in high school…whenever I called out 'Miss Aoi', she would blush and say 'I really hate you, Hikaru', and leave me…if back then, had I grabbed her hand, I wished I would have traveled around with her whether she puffed her face or remained furious or not."

In stark contrast his melancholic face, Hikaru's voice was as tender as ever. Even though it caused Koremitsu's heart to wince further.
Hikaru stared at Koremitsu, saying,
"If it had been you, Koremitsu, surely you would not have made her angry…"
"Why are you saying such things now?"
Koremitsu could not give a reply,
"If you really do love Miss Aoi, Koremitsu, you do not have to worry about me."

—I shall inform you first. No matter the path you choose, Koremitsu, I shall continue to bless you, so that I have no problems leaving this Earth at any given time.

On that night, when Koremitsu held onto Aoi's hand, Hikaru said this with a transparent, tender yet forlorn smile. Back then, the smile showed on his lips, eyes and face.

—After 10 years, who will be standing by your side? No matter who stands beside you. No matter who stands beside Miss Aoi. I shall love both of you from the skies above.

An aching pain rose up Koremitsu's throat.
"Like I can do that! You idiot!"
And he began hollering in the middle of the road.
"Don't just say those words and be mentally prepared for such things! Get down, roll on the floor and start thinking! No, you may have thought of it yourself, but if you're going to conclude so decisively like a fine gentleman and speak with such a haughty attitude, won't that be misunderstood as you not liking Aoi instead! That's why Aoi's always saying 'I really hate Hikaru'!"
Yes. Koremitsu understood that Hikaru loved Aoi, and that since childhood, she had been the most important girl to him.
Despite her not being his beloved, if Hikaru did not fall into the river, and if he was still alive, Aoi surely would have become that. Aoi was Hikaru's future, his hope. Koremitsu understood all that, because they were friends! And because of that, Hikaru should be act all mature. It was better for him to follow his nature, to be stubborn and say that Koremitsu should not do anything to Aoi.
"What are you playing dumb for in front of me!?"
His mind sizzling, his throat parched, Koremitsu body was practically ready to explode.
Hikaru closed his lips, showing a despondent look as he listened to Koremitsu.
The dragged shadow on the ground too remained lonely.

Hikaru’s body was so fleeting in the icy night breeze, so pretty, about to disappear at any given time.
He said,
“Koremitsu. A policeman is looking over here.”
“Eh?”
Koremitsu turned aside, and found a policeman on a bicycle, staring at Koremitsu like how one would look at a suspicious personnel.
“Ack.”
He cringed his neck, and strode forth. Hikaru too followed leisurely.
“It’s because you said something strange, damn it.”
Koremitsu’s face was flushed as he grumbled, his veins popping. Hikaru again kept quiet.
Surely, Hikaru had yet to completely give up on Aoi.
And because he knew that, Koremitsu felt so conflicted, so anguished within.

Chapter 3 - What If I Had a Beloved Person

“So—everyone slacked off.”
It was the following day, after school.
They were in the classroom, the tables and chairs moved to the side to form space for work, and Koremitsu’s fists and shoulders were trembling with rage.
“M-M-M-Mr. Akagi! D-do-do-don’t be angry at them…c-calm down!”
Michiru was shivering as she pacified Koremitsu by the side.
Koremitsu did notify the entire class during the homeroom meeting that they were to build the parts for the haunted house, and requested those that could stay behind to do so. The classmates however slipped out of the classroom one by one, and both Koremitsu and Michiru were the only ones left in the classroom.
“What in the world are they doing!? Don’t they have any enthusiasm!?”
As for Honoka, she went out of the classroom first while on the phone, saying, “Ah, homeroom’s over now! Yes, I’ll be there. Yeah yeah, I’m fine. Completely okay.”
There was an instance when Honoka passed by Koremitsu and met him in the eyes. She however gave him a fierce glance and left, while Koremitsu folded his arms, remaining silent.
(But there’s this bird envelop here. I don’t understand at all! Is she a tsundere!?)
He recalled the envelope he found after PE class for some reason, and there were words beside the bird drawing. Koremitsu’s facial muscles became extremely stiff as a result.

“Devoted love.”

The moment he saw those words, he felt his heart tighten.
Hikaru did say that there was a soul in those words, so one would have to wonder what the intention of the sender was when sending this short line…
(What’s Shikibu thinking…and how does she view me?)
He felt his heart wince in agony, and inadvertently gritted his teeth as he pieced together the words and Honoka.
(But right now, Shikibu isn’t the one I should be thinking about. I have to think about how Hanasato and I have been the only ones working since yesterday. Hikaru’s around, but he can’t even pick up a stapler. He’s completely useless.)
Hikaru himself was floating leisurely in the air, looking around the empty classroom, and said, “It really is terrible. You were too serious when you

made the announcement during homeroom meeting; you should not have scowled with your eyes so red. Everyone else was scared of you.”
(!! I was born with this face!!)
“Let us do our best, Mr. Akagi! If it’s the two of us, a haunted house maze can be done in jiffy!”
“Like hell it’s possible!!”
He instinctively exploded, and then reflected on his actions.
(Throwing a tantrum at Hanasato isn’t going to solve the problem.)
Koremitsu squatted down with his shoulders and head drooped, sinking into a short moment of self-loathing.
Michiru frantically added, stating some very naive words,
“I-it’s fine! I’ve always been doing tasks for others, and I did a lot of chores during Middle School, so I really am good at woodcutting or sewing. When the uncle of the school faculty injured his waist, I helped him change the light bulb! If you’re tired, I can do it all myself…’’
Koremitsu looked up, and found her sniffling like a little puppy.

—I’m used to doing things alone…
It seemed she said something similar the prior day, that everyone was so busy they could not help out, and as the class rep, she was already used to doing things like this.
“That’s not it. This is a class exhibit. Including me, everyone should be involved.”
Koremitsu lifted his head as he said this seriously, and Michiru was shocked.
“You too. If you hate being a jobber for others, just say it out.”
And with a forlorn face, Michiru looked down at Koremitsu.
“Well…I do find your efforts amazing for being willing to do what others don’t want to do because you’re a class rep.”
And Koremitsu”s words caused Michiru’s face to be dyed a little pink.
He got up, and stretched his back.
“Okay, we can’t just keep slacking around like this. Let’s just get to work together today. Let’s see. We’ll just stick some PVC glue on some cardboard boxes—”
“You really are kind, Mr. Akagi…”
Michiru beamed. Koremitsu was taken aback upon being told this, and his face sizzled.
“Ugh, don’t say that.”
“Yes, you are very gentle. You surely would give up your seat if there was an old man on the train. You would have scared anyone if you tried talking to him like a normal person, so you deliberately chose to get up and head to another carriage.”
And even Hikaru chimed in. Surely that would have embarrassed him further, no?

“Mr. Akagi, I brought some honey jam waffles together. Let’s do our best and eat them later.”
A shiver trickled through Koremitsu’s entire body,
(We’re going to eat those super sweet snacks!?)
In that case, if they were to continue working together, he would have to eat those sweets that would melt his teeth?
“Tch, I’ll tie those slackers up and drag them here tomorrow.”
◇ ◇ ◇
The next day, Koremitsu glared at each and every one of his classmates like one ready for a showdown, and declared,
“Hey! We’re going to do the sets after class!”
“Eek!!”
“You dare slack, and I’ll unleash some vengeful spirits on you guys!”
“Sp-spare us!”
“Enough yapping. Stay back after school!”
“Waahh!!!”
And whenever break time came, there would be shrieks coming from all over the classroom, as fear struck all the classmates.
“Will this not cause a reverse effect, Koremitsu? Be kinder when you ask them.”
Hikaru chimed in with skepticism.
“Damn it. I’ll try that smiling attack.”
Yes. Koremitsu did show his smile towards the mother he had a feud with.
Surely it would be a piece of cake showing it to his classmates.
Koremitsu raised his lips, smiling with much goodwill as he said,
“Make sure you come even if you die.”
“!”
“Huh, this guy just passed out…hey, pull yourself together!”
“Ah! Koremitsu! That was more of a ‘weapon’ than a smile! And something akin to a ‘final weapon’ to boot.”
Hikaru had his hand on his forehead.
“The delinquent’s scary!!!”
“Is that the legendary smile of death that’s ‘scarier than a vengeful spirit’!?”
“I heard that those who saw his smile will have their souls sucked out!”
“I-I’ll go to the toilet!”
“Me too!”
And the classmates scurried out of the classroom one after another.
During noon break, the only ones left in the classroom were Koremitsu, Michiru and Honoka, the latter merely staring at the cellphone screen.
“…”
The envelop with the bird drawing was yet to be delivered to Koremitsu’s table on this day.
(I’ll try asking Shikibu for help…try talking to her.)
Perhaps the reason why she stayed in the classroom was that she was hoping for Koremitsu to grovel and say ‘please’.”

“Shi—”
But just when he was about to call out with skepticism.
“…”
Honoka quickly got to her feet and walked out of the classroom.
“Miss Shikibu…too walked away.”
Hikaru lamented.
“—Ugh.”
Koremitsu clenched his fists on the table, gritting his teeth hard.
(I never thought of relying on Shikibu. I never thought of including her.)
And while Koremitsu forced himself, Michiru watched him worriedly, her eyebrows lowered.

Is it going to be honey hell today again? Koremitsu had already given up. As expected, he and Michiru were the only ones left in the classroom after school.
(Why aren’t things going well at all. I did my best asking them for help…is it really because I really look like a delinquent?)
Just when Koremitsu was feeling dejected, he too sensed some gloom from Michiru’s face, and pretended to be nonchalant, saying,
“I’ll try asking those guys in class tomorrow.”
“It’ll…be the same tomorrow.”
Michiru lowered her stare, whispering,
“Even though you did so, you’ll only feel dejected, Mr. Akagi…no matter how much you ask for help, you’ll just be ignored, rejected…it’s too pitiful, so sad…because I know all that.”
Her eyebrows continued to fall, and she looked ready to break into tears.
Called the class rep since Middle School, surely Michiru would have many more experiences of the helplessness Koremitsu felt.
Back then, Koremitsu felt that Michiru was amazing for declaring that she wanted to be the number 1 class representative in Japan.
But even after changing the mental perspective, the painful events would never vanish completely.
“Th-that’s why…I never intended to ask others from the beginning…and I thought it’s better for me to work alone.”
“Then didn’t you ask me for help and made me be some culture festival committee member or something?”
Back then, Michiru really was desperate when she lowered her head and pleaded him for help.
She lifted her head, showing a smile, and that forlorn smile caused Koremitsu’s heart to jump.
“Because I know you will not refuse me, Mr. Akagi.”
The classroom seemed to become more tranquil than before. He could not see Hikaru, just standing face to face with Michiru. His heart was so cold, anguished, perturbed,

“E-erm…I think we’re going to work on the parts for the culture festival, right?”

A timid looking boy appeared from the back door, one Koremitsu had some recognition of. Was that not the boy seated in the middle of the third row? The boy behind him too looked familiar, and though Koremitsu did not know the name, surely that was his classmate.
Behind them were a group of boys and girls, huddled up as they entered the classroom. One of them boys was shivering, supported by another two people. That was the one classmate who was given the ‘Come even if you die’ knockout from Koremitsu.
“Y-yeah. We’re starting with the work now…sorta.”
Koremitsu stammered.
They looked like young boys and girls ready to be offered as human sacrifices, remaining tense and still.
“Surely it is because of your request that everyone is gathered together, Koremitsu. Thank goodness. Let us share the workload then.”
Hikaru drifted towards Koremitsu, earnestly happy for the latter.
Michiru herself stood blankly, and Koremitsu remained skeptical.
(Did everyone actually believe my words that any slackers will be haunted by a vengeful spirit?)
And all of them looked extremely terrible.
“Now then, let’s start packing the tables and chairs.”
After saying that, everyone looked relieved, probably understanding what they had to do, and they entered the classroom to move the tables and chairs.
Michiru herself continued to stare at this scene with a blank face.

Ever since that day, there were no less than 10 people staying back after class to work, and the parts forming the haunted house were slowly forming shape.
All of them tried to avoid making eye contact with Koremitsu or say anything when working. Surely, the sight of that was akin to the laborers forced to work in the ‘Cannery Boat’.
Though everyone did stay back, and Koremitsu was pleased that there was progress in the work, but…
(I guess…it’s different from the ‘Culture Festival’ I imagined it to be…it’s so dead, rather than gloomy…)
He felt conflicted within.
(Everyone’s here because they’re scared of me…though it’s better than them not being here.)
And Honoka herself never participated in the work after school.
He could occasionally hear from the girls that Honoka was joining the volleyball and handball team as a part-timer for friendly matches. She was not only going to be a sales girl for the Japanese Dance club, but also a

model for the photography club and help the shogi club pull in customers, so she was really busy. Perhaps she had no time to take part in the boring class exhibits.
(Stop thinking about Shikibu already.)
Koremitsu tried convincing himself, but the profile seated beside him, staring at the cellphone screen seriously, would always enter his sights. The messages from the bird continued to come, and his erratic thoughts continued to linger on.

The last time he actually had a proper conversation with Honoka was a few days before the culture festival, in the Japanese Dance Clubroom.
Once he was notified by Tsuyako to try some clothing, Koremitsu skipped the class work with Michiru, muttering 'why me too', and arrived at the Japanese Dance club.
"Woah!"
"!!"
Aoi and Honoka were blushing as they turned towards Koremitsu.
Aoi was dressed in a long, fluffy, one-piece dress with a white frilly apron over it. The long, black hair was tied up, and she had a nurse cap on her head, white tights and sandals on her legs. She really was cute.
Honoka herself was wearing a nurse cap, and she was dressed in a fitting miniskirt nurse uniform. That emphasized on her thin, long legs, very lewd.
"M-Mr. Akagi…"
"…!"
Both of them cringed bashfully, and Koremitsu's face and ears were sizzling, ostensibly having witnessed something he should not have.
Both Honoka and Aoi were the ones he really wanted to avoid at this moment.
Yet they suddenly appeared in front of him in nurse uniforms. Koremitsu did not know how to respond.
Ignoring Koremitsu's feelings completely, Hikaru marvelled above Koremitsu's head.
"Wow. Those really do suit Miss Aoi and Miss Shikibu! Miss Aoi is really cute, and Miss Shikibu really makes my heart flutter. Hey, Koremitsu, hurry and praise them."
"P-praise them…!? That's a tall order for me!!"
"!! Isn't this a white coat?"
"Yes. A nurse's lover is a doctor after all."
And saying that, she slotted a stethoscope around Koremitsu's neck.
"Hm, now you do look like an unlicensed, wild doctor with that on you. The wild aspect is amazing, but I suppose it is better to have you a little neater."
"What's with the wild doctor!? Does something like that even exist?"
Tsuyako began to apply some hair dressing on Koremitsu's head, and combed his fringe forward with both hands. The side hair was combed back, and she then slipped a pair of fake glasses on his nose.

“Okay, it is done.”
“Woah, what happened to me?”
“You are really cool, Koremitsu!”
Hikaru’s eyes sparkled as he chimed in enthusiastically.
“”!””
Aoi and Honoka watched with bated breath, and their faces paled.
Tsuyako again chortled.
“Pfft, now you’ve become a terrorist disguised as a doctor, like you will use a surgical knife as a weapon.”
And then, she was rolling on the floor, laughing.
Koremitsu stormed to the mirror in the room, and exclaimed,
“WHAT IS THIS!?”
His red hair was combed all the way back, and the sadistic eyes were framed with glasses, the stethoscope hanging on his neck, and the white coat draped on him. He was glaring back at himself, his back arched. Truly, as Tsuyako did mention, he looked like a terrorist sneaking into a hospital rather than a doctor.
“It really fits you, Mr. Akagi. This is really amazing. My tummy hurts.”
“That’s a lie! Stop laughing as you say that!”
“It really is. Is it not, Miss Shikibu, Miss Aoi?”
Honoka averted her eyes, and Aoi too fidgeted.
“…Isn’t this good?”
“I-I too think, it is amazing.”
Both of them said with their teeny-weeny voices.
An awkward atmosphere froze the place again.
At this moment, Michiru appeared, dressed in the same clothing as Aoi, and upon seeing Koremitsu, she widened her eyes.
“Well, that is cute. I guess an antique style does fit you after all, Miss Hanasato.”
Tsuyako cheerfully stated, and Aoi too added on with a tense voice, “Yes, it does suit you.”
“You’re cute there, Michiru.”
Honoka said clumsily, and after panicking a little, Michiru too answered back clumsily,
“Th-thanks…you’re cool too, Honoka.”
However, both of them did not continue with this conversation as they averted their eyes.
Tsuyako squat on the tatami, stroking the hem of Michiru’s skirt as she said,
“I suppose it is better to roll the skirt up a little. Do you mind helping to make some changes, Miss Shikibu?”
“I-I can do it myself in that case!.”
Michiru said flusteredly.
“It is more convenient to make adjustments while wearing it. Miss Shikibu herself is good at sewing, and will finish it soon, no?”
Honoka gave a bitter look, but she knelt down in front of Michiru.

“Don’t move, Michiru.”
And then, she began to sew Michiru’s skirt.
Michiru lowered her stare, looking at Honoka with a frozen look. Honoka too looked extremely tense as she made one stitch after another.
(Shikibu and Hanasato haven’t patch things up?)
Koremitsu was curious as to what happened between them.
(…What’s Shikibu thinking?)
One had to wonder, what exactly was the reason why Honoka was so aloof to Michiru, and even to Koremitsu.
“Miss Shikibu really is well skilled in sewing. The salad she did for you was decent too, Koremitsu. Surely she will make a good bride.”
Hikaru said with tenderness.
Upon hearing Hikaru’s words, Koremitsu recalled the incident in the summer when he returned home, and found Honoka suddenly standing in the corridor, welcoming him back.

—We-welcome back

He recalled the day when she stared at him with a blushing face.
He recalled the moment when his hand touched her when they were about to scatter the 7 spice powder on the tempura.
Back then, Koremitsu knew that Honoka preferred spicy food, like him.
And then, there was the moment when she was in Koremitsu’s room, staring at him feebly.

—I-is it alright that…I find myself liking you?

Till this point, he had yet to convey his answer to Honoka.
He felt solace whenever he was with her, and joy whenever he conversed with her. He was elated that Honoka unexpectedly had similar tastes to him, and he would be dejected when Honoka ignored him. He felt terrible.
One had to wonder, what were those feelings?
She was the first one to interact with Koremitsu, so feared and shunned by others, but Koremitsu wondered how Honoka, who kept interacting with him thereafter, viewed him.

—“I haven’t forgotten, Shikibu. About you saying you like me.”

(I still haven’t forgot.)
However, he still could not give her an answer.
Suddenly, he sensed Aoi staring at him uneasily, while he himself was looking at Honoka, and he felt a jolt inside.
He was so overly concerned with Honoka, his feelings for Aoi were also shaken all this time.
(Now I don’t have a right to call Hikaru a playboy.)

While he was ostensibly wandering through a dim maze with no exit in sight, he could feel Michiru's hand pinching his white coat.
"Mr. Akagi…it's about time to head back to the classroom…we still have a lot more to do…"
Once he learned of this excuse to leave Honoka and Aoi, Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief.
"Oh, okay."
He nodded, feeling peeved at his own cowardice.
With a tragic look, Aoi watched Koremitsu and Michiru leave together.
Honoka herself merely pouted her lips, scowling as she looked elsewhere.
◊ ◊ ◊
His heart still yet to be at east, Koremitsu returned home, and handed a culture festival entrance ticket to Shioriko.
"Wow, thank you big brother!"
Shioriko was squealing about.
"Lapis, look, it's an entrance ticket! Amazing, isn't it?"
Even Lapis was look.
The cat merely puffed away, an leisurely bent her body, beginning to comb her fur.
'Thank goodness' or 'calm down already' or 'ah yes', what the purr meant, nobody had an idea.
Masakaze's shogi coach was going to participate in a tournament on the day of the culture festival, and Masakaze was going to give his support. Koharu was going to attend her friend's wedding, so neither could accompany Shioriko to the culture festival.
Koharu insisted that Shioriko, as an elementary schoolgirl, could not attend a high school festival alone. Masakaze was overly worried that there would be strange men wooing her, voicing his disapproval.
"I'll be fine going there alone."
Shioriko insisted on going alone, but after realizing that Koharu and Masakaze would not budge, she proposed a compromise.
"In that case, I'll ask my classmate Yū and her dad to come along. Yū said that she had some tickets from her cousin, so she'll be going."
"Okay, that'll do."
"Got to hand it to you."
And so, Masakaze and Koharu agreed.
"Can the culture festival come sooner?"
While Shioriko beamed innocent, Koremitsu felt a lot more relieved, yet he remained so gloomy.
"Big brother Koremitsu? Did something happen in school? You don't look very lively."
Shioriko asked worriedly.
"It's nothing."
And he patted Shioriko's tender black hair. The girl then puffed her cheeks, saying,

“Stop thinking of me as a kid! If there’s anything you’re sad about, you can tell Shiiko here! Shiiko will help eliminate big brother’s enemies from society.”
“…Stop with that already.”
And Koremitsu curled his lips into a frown.
(Now even Shiiko’s worried about me. I really got to buck up here. Got to do my best for the culture festival.)
“What’s your class going to do, big brother?”
“A haunted house.”
“You’re going to act as a ghoul?”
“Like I’m going to!”
While Shioriko clung onto Koremitsu cheerfully as they conversed without restraint, Hikaru watched over the blood siblings-like duo with his tender eyes.
◇ ◇ ◇
Two days before the culture festival began, the maze of cardboard and glue was basically done. What was left was to assemble the parts before the opening ceremony.
The work after school ended early, and once the classmates left, Koremitsu looked around at all the cardboard walls leaning by the walls to dry, feeling gratified.
“Now that we’re here…got to make it succeed.”
Koremitsu whispered to Michiru, who was looking at the same time from beside him.
“Really had you taking care of me all this while, Hanasato.”
And Michiru said so lifelessly,
“No…I didn’t do anything.”
She replied,
“The one who helped you is the sender with the bird, I guess…”
He looked towards her, and found her lowering her head in a glum manner. He could not help but wonder what happened to her actually. With her head lowered, she continued to ask Koremitsu hesitantly,
“Mr. Akagi…do you have any plans for the culture festival?”
“Huh?”
As for his plans, it would be the class exhibits, the Dance Club’s exhibit, and the special security branch Asai commissioned him with.
Michiru continued to clench her fists,
“I…don’t have any. When I was in middle school, Hono’s very busy because she’s very popular, so she can’t be with me, and I could only read in the library…but…I really want to be with someone I like, strolling in the stroll while holding hands, eating cotton candy, fishing water balloons, shooting toys at the gun shop, dancing a folk dance after the night festival…I really want those things lovers do…and thought that if I had a boyfriend, I’ll do that…”

For some reason, Michiru merely stood blankly, stating her desires for the culture festival. Beside Koremitsu however, Hikaru was giving a *'this is bad'* look, so the former understood that he was not in a good situation.
He did feel so uneasy before. Back then, his gut was aching, and cold sweat was trickling.
It was soon after the second semester started, and he was called up to the roof to talk about something. The sky was dark that day, the sun could not be seen, and he could only feel some humid air. Back then, Michiru lowered her head, asking him with a teeny-weeny voice.

—Mr. Akagi, who do you like? Hono or me?

Back then, he really did not understand why Michiru was asking this question. He felt his back chill, and he suffocated as she continued to stare at him with those moist, helpless eyes.
Surely, he could not compare this, and could not answer. That was what he said back then.
Then, Michiru stared back with a stare filled with more intent, asking,

—"Then…do you like Hono?"

By the time he realized it, Koremitsu current atmosphere was as tense as it was back then, so still he he could hear the erratic breathing from each other.
And Michiru lifted her head, starting at Koremitsu with a thoughtful look.
Hikaru too stared at Koremitsu and Michiru with such tension.
"Mr. Akagi, I…"
A soft voice entered Koremitsu's ears, numbing his mind. While he gasped for breath due to his anxiety, a nonchalant, uppity voice came from above.

"Mr. Koremitsu Akagi, please come to the student council office immediately."

Asai's voice echoed from the speakers, breaking the tense atmosphere.
"You know the consequences if you delay any further. Come now."
That uppity voice certainly knew how to command others as it prompted Koremitsu again.
"Sorry, gotta go."
Michiru's eyes became despondent, and Koremitsu felt overwhelming guilt in his heart, but his feet were already headed for the door.
◇ ◇ ◇
"Do you know what day is it today? Mr. Akagi."
Once he opened the door to the student council office, Asai was glaring at him furiously,
"It is 2 days before the culture festival."

And again coldly stated without waiting for his reply.
“Why do you not show up when others call you. Do you realize that you belong to the special security team?”
“Y-yeah…sorry.”
Michiru’s teary eyes lingered in Koremitsu’s mind, and he became a little startled. Asai frowned, “This really is strange.” muttering,
“I suppose there is quite an anomaly for you to actually apologize to me directly.”
“That’s not it, alright? Even I’ll apologize to anyone if I offend that person. I’m already extremely busy with the stuff in my class, and I admit that I forgot all about the special security group.”
“…I see. Well, I will not be commending you for that.”
Asai coldly retorted,
“Well, it is a good thing to be able to reflect on yourself, if you do not repeat the same mistake over and over again.”
Saying that, Asai handed him a map of the school campus on the culture festival, a ‘special security’ armband, and the documents for the patrol time slots and locations he would be supervising.
“Memorize this map before the opening.”
“Hey, I got the Middle and Elementary School branches too? I can’t do that in 2 days.”
“You are mainly in charge of the high school faculty floor, but it is better to memorize everything just in case. Do it, perfectly.”
Asai’s direct words were like a chopper, not allowing any refusal.
“O-okay.”
Surely he would have to burn the midnight oil on this night. He however would feel peeved to have Asai deem him to be a useless fellow.
(I’ll do this, perfectly.)
And with a business-like tone, Asai briefed him everything about the work that day, and all he was to pay particular heed to.
Since she would not allow him any time to take notes, surely that meant he would have to memorize with his mind, and that meant Asai did not want such incompetence where he could not remember such things.
In fact, Asai was briefing him without looking at her notes.
That was why Koremitsu stared at Asai intently, pricking his ears, remembering every single word she said.
“Both Koremitsu and Asa really are not willing to lose.”
There was Hikaru’s sweet tone and chuckle from the side.
And after more than 30 minutes passed, Asai said unflinchingly,
“Have you noticed, Mr Akagi?”
“What?”
“You and I are the only ones in this room.”
No, Hikaru’s around too. The moment Koremitsu wanted to answer this however, he realized Asai would have been furious if he said that.
“Is that so?”

And so, he muttered. Asai stared at Koremitsu with her long, sharp eyes.
“I have finally found a chance to talk with you for real.”
Koremitsu was stunned by those words.
For some reason, he had a bad feeling about it…
“About Hikaru’s ‘beloved’.”
(It’s about that after all.)

Koremitsu scowled, and Hikaru hid his smile.
(Saiga did mention about Hikaru's stepmom.)
Fujino was pregnant.
And Hikaru did say the child in the belly was not his.
Hikaru had always loved Fujino since young. A few years back, Fujino did have that cardinal sin with Hikaru back then, but later on, she kept rejecting his advances. That thus could not have been Hikaru's child.
(Saiga however thinks that it's Hikaru's child.)
The illegitimate child was growing day by day in the belly of Hikaru's most beloved. If it was to be born one day, even the strong-willed Asai would not have been able to calm down.
"That's not Hikaru's child."
Koremitsu said earnestly, not evading Asai's stare.
"Hikaru himself said so, and I believe him."
Asai frowned,
"Looking at the circumstances, I do not suppose Hikaru had the time to talk about this complicated event."
"I can only try to make you believe me somewhat. Hikaru told me everything about him and his stepmom. Back in March, when his stepmom returned to her hometown, Hikaru could not hold back the pain in his heart, and went to the Mikados villa where his stepmom was to reunite with her. The stepmom told him that she didn't love him, and chased him away, thinking he's an eyesore. A dejected Hikaru went to the Church, got reunited with Sora, and so nothing happened between Hikaru and the stepmom. If back then, if Hikaru and the stepmom were really honest with each other, I suppose Hikaru wouldn't have been so dejected. Anyway, that's not Hikaru's kid."
Koremitsu used his own method to think and convey what Hikaru confessed to him.
Hikaru loved Fujino, but the latter rejected him.
That would be the entire truth.
But after that, Hikaru's words and memories of the Golden Week in May was very ambiguous. Was the one who asked Hikaru out at night really Fujino?
Hikaru slipped and fell into the river Was the one who tried pulling Hikaru out from the river the same person; as for that, he did not know.
Also, relating to that, Koremitsu felt that there was something important Hikaru was still hiding.
And when he said this to Asai, Hikaru listened in dismay. The profile appearing in the eyes became gloomy, causing Hikaru to show a blank look.
With a heinous stare, Asai stared back at Koremitsu.
"It really does not fit with the current situation…but I shall believe what Hikaru confessed to you. This however does not determine who the father of the child is."
Surely there was a strong hint of denial in Asai's voice.

“Only the mother knows who the father of the child is. It is not strange for Hikaru not to know.”
“So that means nothing happened between Hikaru and the Stepmom—”
Asai cut off Koremitsu, saying,
“On that night, after refusing Hikaru and chasing him away, she left the villa, and did not stay there. The servants were silenced, but the locals did say that she left the villa. Perhaps she did go after Hikaru.”
“Wha—”
Koremitsu inadvertently gasped.
Hikaru too widened his eyes, his body swaying. Perhaps he did not know either.
“And then, she and Hikaru—”
“Stop it, Asa!”
Hikaru exclaimed in hysteria.
“I spent the night with Sora that night. That person never loved me, and left me aside, never willing to betray my father. Please do not sully that person’s name and slander her.”
Hikaru’s lips were quivering, his eyes clearly flickering in anguish, and he looked ready to explode at any given moment as he kept begging. That yell was bellowing furiously at Kormeitsu’s chest, stabbing it.
“Stop it already, Saiga!”
And Koremitsu bellowed in turn, causing Asai to be stunned, unable to talk.
“Please…stop it already. Stop slandering Hikaru’s love. Hikaru…will be dejected.”
The painful undertone lingered in Koremitsu’s words, and the stare too was filled with anguish.
Asai herself looked motified as she stared at Koremitsu for a while, and then, she said with a stiff tone,
“Understood…I shall leave this topic aside until I obtain concrete information.”
Hikaru lowered his head, biting his lips. Surely he was still in agony.
Koremitsu too frowned hard, and lowered his head.
“Sorry…”
“…It really is strange hearing an apology from you.”
And he was responded with a conflicted voice.
“Speaking of which, it seems like Kazuaki knew that Aoi isn’t Hikaru’s favorite. I was worried if he would do anything to Sora, but Sora was fine. Maybe he’s planning to do something to the stepmom…”
While Koremitsu expressed his doubts, Hikaru too began to worry.
“Kazuaki probably will not be able to do for the time being.”
Asai said.
“Why?”
“Fight fire with fire. I did something.”
There was a blade-like glint in Asai’s thing eyes.

“I caused the people around Kazuaki’s mother to set things such that she will be against her own son. She herself would be troubled that her supposedly obedient son tried to escape from her control, so it was not too difficult to do this. Kazuaki is an important piece to her, so she will not try to hurt him. The fact remains that they are our enemies.”
(Asa really is a scary woman to be able to talk about this so calm.)
Cold sweat began to appear on Koremitsu’s face.
“Kazuaki is currently in England. On the surface, it may look like a short-term study trip; in fact, it is a convenient plan to avoid his mother’s attacks.”
Hikaru too felt relieved, *“Thank goodness.”* heaving a little sigh of relief as he muttered.
(Well, things are much better off with that perverted bastard of a crossdresser not in Japan at the moment.)
Feeling relieved, Koremitsu praised Asai,
“Ohh! You’re rather reliable, Asa.”
“…Of course.”
And Asai batted her eyelids, whispering as she looked aside.
At that moment, silence filled the time.
“…”
The pretty sidelong face was facing Koremitsu, and with a stoic tone, she said,
“I heard that Aoi…had been busy helping with the Japanese Dance Club.”
The ruptured relationship between Asai and Aoi during the summer vacation was not repaired, but there were signs of it.
Though Asai may act cold and aloof, she certainly was still worried about her close childhood friend Aoi.
Koremitsu never thought Asai would suddenly mention Aoi’s name, and faltered. Even he was shocked by this.
“I-I didn’t force her into helping out.”
His heart was pumping, his face sizzling.
(This is bad. My face seems red now.)
Whenever he heard Aoi’s name, he would show such a reaction, a heavy symptom itself. Asai frowned, and stared at Koremitsu intently.
“That’s, just something Aoi herself wanted…no, it’s just that, even though she’s not in the Japanese Dance Club.It’s the same intent working part-time back then…Aoi just wanted to change herself…so, Aoi’s…”
Koremitsu wanted to surmize matters, but his face kept sizzling, his words erratic. Hikaru, by the side, looked melancholic, and this caused Koremitsu much distress and confusion.
(Damn it, I’m reacting too much.)
Perhaps it was best for him not to ay anything. Koremitsu choe to keep quiet.
Asai purused to the matter, asking,

“Mr Akagi. Do you like Aoi?”

Blood rose into Koremitsu’s head, and his body was searing. A fanatic black emotion gushed out, and Koremitsu yelled out, unable to hold it in,
“Aoi’s the only one impossible for me!!”

Chapter 4 - The Flowers Quietly Scatter

“Miss Aoi, do you mind heading over to Miss Asai and request her to stamp this application form?”
Upon hearing Tsuyako’s request, Aoi’s petite body shivered, not knowing what to do. Honoka in turn was packing her uniform for the culture festival, looking on.
“Eh…but.”
The lowered eyelashes covered her eyes, and she sealed her peach-colored lips, pondering seriously
“Mr. Akagi was just summoned by Miss Asai over the PA system. You must be feeling worried, right?”
Tsuyako said this, revealing an alluring smile.
Honoka too was taken aback, sensing that these words were said for her.
(I-I, won’t be so worried about Akagi…I haven’t been talking to him for quite a while, and I’ve been trying my best to avoid eye contact with him…)
But for some reason, whenever the image appeared in her mind, that of the red, ruffled, messy hair, the sharp eyes, the boy with his back arched, her heart would flutter in angst.
(Akagi…probably thinks I’m ignoring her…I kept clinging to him, causing him much trouble. While Akagi became a committee member of the culture festival, all busy over the culture festival, I slacked off and went back. He’s definitely angry at me now…I feel like I’m no longer that reliable Heliotrope…)

—You’re really a good person.

—It’s great to have you around, Shikibu..

Surely those were not words to be spoken to a girl. He did not comprehend a girl’s heart, merely jesting.
But even so, whenever she thought of how she was trusted by Koremitsu, her cheeks would inadvertently broil, and the more she thought of him, the more she would swirl around on the swivel chair.
(Even though we’re classmates, I’m happy exchanging messages with Akagi, going to the pool with him.)
She could no longer converse with Koremitsu as she did before.

—“You’re lying, Hono. You really like Mr. Akagi, don’t you?”
&nsbp;
It was after school, in the empty classroom, when Michiru went straight to the point, causing her heart to wince in bitterness.

She instinctively denied Michiru's words.

—Th-that's not true! Didn't I say so many times already that he and I are just classmates?
And with forlorn eyes, Michiru stared at Honoka, so impudent in defending herself. She then sputtered and shivered, saying,
—Then, please don't be so nice with Mr. Akagi in front of him. Don't tease him. Don't talk to Mr. Akagi with a red face. Don't worry over Mr. Akagi. If you don't like him…pl-please don't get in my way…

Michiru, who used to be tentative about aggravating others, and would never state obstinate matters no matter how maligned she felt, actually stated her thoughts clearly, not shunning from Honoka's eyes. The latter was completely crushed by Michiru.

—Okay…

And she nodded stiffly.
Michiru heaved a sigh of relief, and then, with a teary look, she turned her back on Honoka, departing alone.
Honoka was left alone, and pricking kept striking her chest, regret and guilt conflicted within her.
She was Michiru's friend, and yet she lied to the latter.
And till this point, she continued to maintain this lie.
Whereas Michiru actually conveyed her feelings to Honoka.
(It would have been fine if I said that I like Akagi back then, right?)
And while she continued to endure the ripping inside her heart, she continued to peek at Koremitsu and Michiru, the latter having recommended the former for the culture festival committee, the two of them working together to prepare the props during break or after school, and she reflected upon her actions.
Michiru was doing her best, trying to help Koremitsu; that should have been what Honoka should have been doing, yet even when Koremitsu came to talk to her, she would ignore him with a frozen face.
The expression Michiru showed Koremitsu was so honest, so full of vitality. When she saw Michiru present her homemade sweets to Koremitsu during the break, Koremitsu received them with a sour look, cautiously taking one bite after another. After he expressed his thanks in such a tentative manner, Michiru was beaming so brightly, so captivating; even a girl like Honoka felt this way, and surely to Koremitsu, she must have been very cute too.
Koremitsu was beginning to realize Michiru's good points, and surely he would approach her. Thinking about this, she was a little peeved a Michiru, and more so at herself.
(And besides, the one Akagi has his eyes on—isn't Michiru…)
Her heart, and her entire body, was tense.

Aoi again lowered her head flusteredly.
Honoka heard of the awkward relationship between Aoi and the student council president Asai, hailed the Matriarch Asa. The talented woman, a close confidant of the Mikados, had been protecting over the pure, innocent girl called Her Highness Aoi. This was the relationship all the students in Heian Academy would know of, and yet there was some change in their relationship.
Both of them were invited to the fireworks event held by Tsuyako at the riverbank, but they deliberately shunned each other.
“Hey, Miss Aoi, is Mr. Akagi still at the student council office? I sent him a message asking me to come here for the timeslot allocation, but he has been completely ignoring me. Do you mind calling Mr. Akagi back here when you ask Miss Asai to stamp this document?”
Surely Tsuyako knew of some discongruence between Asai and Aoi, but she still tried getting Aoi to go to Asai, perhaps to mend the relationship between them. Tsuyako, looking so carefree, was probably a sentimental woman who cared for others.
Asai and Aoi both showed contempt at Tsuyako over the scandal involving Mikado Hikaru, and yet Tsuyako was trying her best to be the matchmaker.
The same thing happened when she got Aoi to assist in the Japanese Dance Club exhibition, as she cheerfully spoke to Aoi, prudent in her choice of words, showing concern so as to not let the latter feel downhearted.
Surely it was Tsuyako’s kind intentions to let Aoi handle Asai.
Aoi probably would understand this.
Surely however, it would be awkward for Aoi to head over. The sight of her lowering her head, sealing her lips tightly was really heartwrenching.
Honoka herself did have an awkward conversation with Michiru, and the memory of it was inadvertently reflected on Aoi.
“Erm, can I go with you?”
Aoi widened her eyes at Honoka.
And Tsuyako giggled.
“Oh yes, I suppose it is better to have two people go drag Mr. Akagi from Miss Asa. Please do so, Miss Shikibu, Miss Aoi.”
“Okay, let’s get going, Your Highness Aoi.”
“Eh-ehhh!?”
While Aoi let out a soft whisper, her shoulders raised apprehensively,
“Righto, we’re going, Tsuyako-senpai!”
Honoka stood at the door, deliberately raising her voice.
“Be careful on the way, Miss Shikibu, Miss Aoi.”
Tsuyako’s radiant, red lips too bloomed as she showed a cheerful smile.
And so, with Aoi beside her, Honoka walked down the corridor.
It was the eve of the culture festival, so the dismissal time was later than usual, and she could hear the buzz from the surrounding voices, and the ripping sounds of work.
While walking with her head lowered, Aoi whispered bashfully.

“Thank you for accompanying me. I may find it a little awkward going alone…thank you.:”
The long black hair dangled down her shoulders, swaying with the breeze. Her petite body retreated, her cheeks slightly flushed, and she looked so prim, so proper, so fleeting, it was impossible to see that she was Honoka’s upperclassman.
(Ahh, she’s so cute…)
Honoka’s heart too started to ache.
And then she sheltered those emotions, answering with her usual tone.
“No, I just wanted to come out and get some air.”
Aoi’s expression became increasingly docile and demure, and she sealed her lips together, asking tentatively,
“Mr. Akagi has been busy preparing the class exhibition, has he not? I have yet to see him appear at the Dance Club…”
“Eh? Ah, yeah.”
Upon hearing Aoi inquire about Koremitsu, Honoka felt a stab through her heart.
Her mind immediately recalled the sight of Aoi and Koremitsu holding hands.
Once she learned from Aoi that at the cafe, Koremitsu inadvertently met his mother who left home, she really could not rein in her worry, and that night, she approached Koremitsu’s house.
There was a woman she never met before, standing in front of Koremitsu. There was a boy beside the woman, holding her hand. In turn, Aoi grasped onto Koremitsu’s hand while the latter remained teary.
At that moment, she felt that she lost.
Having witnessed that scene, Honoka had given up.
When Koremitsu’s love, Yū Kanai, chose to head to Australia to live with her family, Honoka felt that she was not a part of Koremitsu’s love, and yet she continued to fight on. She got conceited in thinking that she, not Yū, was the one woman closest to Koremitsu.
She tried conveying her feelings to him many times. Even though Koremitsu could never forget about Yū, he never shunned Honoka, and did go to the pool with her, telling her ‘I haven’t forgotten, Shikibu, about you saying you like me’. He even made a promise with her to respond to her feelings.
And so, she ended up liking him more.
And the hope grew in her heart.
Even though they were classmates on good terms with each other, surely Koremitsu would view Honoka as a woman and fall in love with her.
And yet the conceited fantasy vanished the instant she saw Aoi hold hands with Koremitsu.
The princess Aoi certainly did not match the gruff civilian Koremitsu.
They were polar opposites, yet with similar feelings, they bonded together firmly.
Honoka could not comprehend.

She was torn within.
(So Akagi has fallen for Her Highness Aoi…)
Surely she could not convey her intentions to Michiru for she knew that she had already given up.
So she silently nodded when Michiru warned her not to get in her way.
(What kind of a love expert am I? A reliable advisor for those girls who lost their way in love? I'm so foolish and timid, it's embarrassing.)
And as she continued to brood so incessantly, she felt the distance between them increasing.
Aoi lowered her head silently, perhaps because they were approaching Asai.
Or perhaps…
(She's thinking about Akagi, isn't she…?)
Once they reached the door, Aoi took a little breath, and was about to knock on the oor.
Only for a shrill voice to ring behind the door.
"Aoi's the only one impossible for me!!"
◇ ◇ ◇
"Aoi's the only one impossible for me!!"
Koremitsu hollered at Asai, his throat ostensibly ripping out, and his head, mouth, ears and throat flaring.
He was blazing.
Asai had her arms folded in front of her, a scowl on her pretty face.
And Hikaru too watched Koremitsu agonisingly.
Agitated, Koremitsu knew that he would be in a tight spot, but he could not stop himself from lashing out.
When Michiru questioned him on the roof, asking if he did like Honoka, he immediately answered 'I do'.
He always felt Honoka was a good girl.
So when he was asked if he 'liked' her, he answered in affirmation without a single hesitation.
He blurted it out, gasping for breath.
But he certainly could not answer Asai's question.
Yes, definitely, even if he had to be interrogated or tortured! He could not day this even if his body was torn apart.
He could not think about it!
His body started to sear, his breathing discomforting, his eyes were bloodshot as his temples throbbed.
"Aoi's the most precious girl to Hikaru, and I can't ever like her in this aspect because of that!"
◇ ◇ ◇
"I can't ever like her in this aspect because of that!"
Koremitsu's bellow echoed into the ears of Aoi and Honoka behind the door.
The roar, a wild beast's cry, shook the ears to numbness, and the heart ached slightly.

Aoi widened her eyes, her body shivering. Her serene, pure face was smeared with shock and despair, and her eyes grew increasingly moist. Her slender throat was choking silently, and the raised hand that was to knock on the door just remained there, lost.
Once that hand continued to clench like one hoping to latch a safety belt, Aoi chose not to knock on the door, instead turning to run away.
And Honoka frantically gave chase.
“Your Highness Aoi, please wait!”
With bated breath, she gave chase with all her might.
Aoi herself galloped and stumbled as she dashed down the corridor and scaled the stairs. The black glossy hair swayed behind her head.
“Your Highness Aoi, wait!”
Perhaps Aoi did not hear Honoka’s voice; Surely she was stupefied to hear Koremitsu’s comments.
She stumbled, and placed her hand on the wall, possibly due to having exhausted herself running down the corridor. She remained collapsed on the floor.
“Your Highness Aoi.”
Honoka hastily got over to her, and proceeded to kneel down as well. The moment she held those slender shoulders, the tears dripped from the round doll-like eyes, dampening the snowy cheeks.
“M-Mr. Akagi was being so kind with me…because I am Hikaru’s fiancee.”
Aoi sobbed as she whispered.
And she placed her small hands under her mouth, clasping them together.
She continued to shiver and speak out, unable to rein in her tears.
“I too…will probably never like Mr. Akagi ever.”
Honoka’s body and heart throbbed.
(That isn’t the case. Even—even if Akagi himself said this—)
She felt an itching in her throat, her chest compressed, and she was so suffocated, in such pain. She knew she would be left in a disadvantage, Honoka felt that she had to express these words.
How was she supposed to let Koremitsu’s intent be ruined by those words?
“That isn’t it…Akagi…! His feelings for you are…!”
◇ ◇ ◇
“…Aoi…just Aoi…”
Koremitsu’s voice became increasingly hoarse.
And while the rampant heat flowed throughout his body, the regret that struck him left him with remorse.
(Why am I yelling like an idiot here?)
Hikaru too looked on worriedly.
Asai was fuming, scowling, her face increasingly stoic as she watched this foolish man in front of him. This caused the latter to be increasingly anxious.
“…Sorry. I got a little agitated.”
He muttered.

“How many times have you been apologizing?”
Asai coldly noted.
“If you are going to keep apologizing, the value of it will decrease. That reckless, infuriating attitude of yours certainly fits you better.”
She was aloof in face, but perhaps she was encouraging him.
“I shall pretend that I did not hear your words then. In fact, I suppose I just heard a mad dog howling away, and I am not so sure what it was all about.”
“Saiga…”
“If you are intending to thank me, I suppose you can forget about it. I may feel worse off to be thanked by you.”
The vicious words were sweet as nectar to Koremitsu.
And thanks to her, Koremitsu managed to basically calm down.
Asai again turned her head aside.
“Mr. Akagi, do you understand why I placed you in the special security group?”
Upon being questioned this so suddenly, Koremitsu answered without hesitation.
“Because you hate me? You want to cause me trouble?”
Asai, who had disdain at Koremitsu, was actually shoving him work. Those two reasons were the only ones he could assume.
Asai was immediately left fuming, and scowled.
Was that the wrong answer?”
“You are the only boy I allowed to call me Asa.”
“Yeah, you don’t have any friends in the first place.”
“…That is not what I meant.”
Asai’s lips pouted further, and she showed some displeasure in her eyes.
For some reason, she sighed.
“I still have a lot of documents to read through.. Since I have no time to continue chatting with you, please head out.”
She coldly retorted.

Once they exited to the corridor, Hikaru grimaced, saying,
“Koremitsu, have your obliviousness increased by 70% with regards to Asa?”
“Huh?”
“Well, do not mind about it. It does appear that you are able to get along with Asa there, but I suppose she might be feeling angsty within. This may be the first time for Asa…but it is said that first loves never work out…”
“What are you getting at!?”
“What I am saying is that anyone will feel anxious dealing with this for the first time, and panic, unable to do anything.”
“…I really don’t get what you mean.”
Koremitsu kept his scowl, but he felt relieved within after seeing that Hikaru, in front of him, was able to talk with him.
(I’m not a brat here…I can’t keep yelling away like this…)

Once he returned to the classroom, he found it quiet.
(Did Hanasato go to the Dance Club?)
Tsuyako said that they were to be allocated timeslots manning the beverage stand, so he was to head over as well.
Once he bent down to pick up the bag hanging by his table, he was taken aback.
There was someone lying down there.
It was Michiru!
With her hands clasped together on her chest, she was lying on the floor in her uniform, facing upwards, her eyes closed.
“Hey, Hanasato!”
Koremitsu hurriedly leaned forward.”
“What is the matter, Miss Hanasato!?’
Hikaru too panicked as he yelled.
“Ah…Mr. Akagi.”
Michiru slowly opened her eyes.
She then closed her eyes again, looking very sleepy.
“So you returned.”
Her voice was a little slurred, perhaps because she was sleepy.
“Like that’s the point here! Why are you sleeping on the floor!? You scared me into thinking you’re a dead body here! Anyway, isn’t the floor hard and cold!? If you really want to sleep, go to the Japanese Dance Clubroom. There’s still some tatami there!”
Michiru widened her eyes, and looked down at Koremitsu while lying face up.
Her eyes again looked as forlorn as a forsaken puppy.
And then, both their faces were so close to each other’s; upon realizing something was amiss with this position, Koremitsu suddenly got flustered.
“Anyway, g-get up for now.”
He turned aside, saying this gruffly, and heard Michiru’s anguished voice.
“The flowers have scattered…”
He turned around, and found Michiru still lying down, looking at the ceiling in grief. However, they were not staring at the ceiling in particular, probably staring at something instead.
“Flowers? Will flowers bloom at this time?”
Hikaru looked stupefied.
And agony continued to flick in Michiru’s eyes.
“You haven’t realized…I guess…this can’t be helped…if I’m to…just silently…wait for it all to scatter…nobody around them will notice…and they won’t notice it scattering…it slowly piles up…and then it gets buried.”
Michiru did not seem to be sleeptalking here.
However, the eyes staring at the ceiling looked a little damp.
“Hey, what will happen to the scattered petals?’
“Won’t they become fertilizer?”

Koremitsu asked.
“…Is that so?”
She weakly muttered.
“Did something happen?”
“…Nothing.”
“Then get up. Sorry to keep you waiting. I never thought that you’ll be waiting for me.”
“It’s nothing, just that I wanted to wait for you, that’s all.”
“Hurry up and get up now.”
He held Michiru by the hand, and pulled her up.
Michiru sat upright, and stared at Koremitsu’s hand that was grabbing hers.
“Mr. Akagi, your fingers…”
“Eh? Wh-what is it?”
Michiru wrapped both hands around Koremitsu’s, and leaned her face over, using her own fingers to touch each of Koremitsu’s, staring at them intently, and making him angsty.
“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you doing here!?”
Whenever Michiru’s slender fingers touched Koremitsu’s fingertips or the gaps between them, he would feel itchy.
And Hikaru, watching sidelong, widened his eyes.
“…They’re rough.”
“Huh?”
“The fingers…are so hard and bony…and they’re large…firm.”
Michiru’s eyes again dampened. She lowered her eyebrows, looking anguished and forlorn as she stroked at one of Koremitsu’s fingers, touching it, and bringing it to her lips.’
“!”
Koremitsu was taken aback, and his face and neck were completely beetroot.
Hikaru too inadvertently leaned forward.
“Ha-Ha-ha-Ha-Hanasato!!”
His tongue was a little numb to his commands.
He pulled his hand from Michiru’s, and continued to shiver.
Speaking of which, if Tsuyako herself was to do this, he could understand, even though he would be a little startled.
It would not be strange for that upperclassman, so cheerful and flirtatious, to do such things.
However, Michiru was not this kind of person; to Koremitsu at least, she was Michiru Hanasato, the serious class representative.
“You overslept, right!? That’s definitely it! Huh? You didn’t sleep last night, did you?”
“…I always sleep 8 hours a day.”
“This amount of time isn’t enough! You got to sleep 10 hours a day!”
“Eh…okay.”

“Go back and sleep now. It’s the last day before the culture festival tomorrow, so things will get busy. Get some good rest for today!”
With puppy-like eyes, Michiru stared at Koremitsu’s frantic self, and twirled the curls of her hair.
“No, Mr. Akagi, you’re going to the Japanese Dance Clubroom, right? I’ll go as well. Upperclassman Tsuyako called me there.”
“I-I see. Erm—”
The cellphone in the pocket vibrated.
Flipping it open, he found that the message was from Tsuyako, prompting him to hurry over.
“Not good. Let’s hurry over, Hanasato.”
“Yes.”
Michiru still looked as lethargic as before.
What Michiru did just now was undoubtedly strange for her usual self. It felt strange ever since she started rambling about the full course of a lover’s progression.
Perhaps Michiru did encounter something troublesome herself. Koremitsu had an ominous feeling.
And Hikaru, floating in the air, looked nonplussed as well.
◇ ◇ ◇
“How slow you are, Mr. Akagi.”
Tsuyako beamed as she welcomed Koremitsu’s arrival.
“Did Miss Asai not let you go? I did request Miss Aoi and Miss Shikibu to go fetch you, but they came back running, terrified. I even asked if they actually saw the both of you making out in the student council office.”
“Upperclassman Tsuyako…! I-I-I didn’t see such a thing!”
Honoka stood up, yapping away, and Aoi sealed her lips tightly as she turned her head aside.
Recalling what he hollered at Asai in the student council office with regards to Aoi, Koremitsu began to feel a little jumpy.
(Damn it. If Shikibu and Aoi came to the student council office, maybe they did hear those words!)
Surely it was great that they came back running.
“Oh, Mr. Akagi, you are being sweaty here. Did you and Miss Asai actually —”
“That’s impossible! I just reported to her about the culture festival!”
“I suppose that is the case then.”
Tsuyako gave him a wink.
Koremitsu tried his best not to look in Aoi’s direction. Having just squabbled with Asai, surely he would be unable to remain calm if he were to look at Aoi.
Right in a corner of his eyes was a tense-looking Honoka, glancing her head aside. She pouted her lips, looking a little tense.
There was no change there as well…
(I didn’t manage to find out if the bird’s envelopes are from her.)

His chest felt tightened.
Michiru looked gloomy beside Koremitsu, and only Tsuyako was beaming away, cheerfully chatting with them; if not for that, the entire room would be in somber silence.
By the time he realized it, even Hikaru was staring in a certain direction bitterly.
The forlorn look was certainly staring at Aoi.
(Why must you…show that face…)
The love, anguish and longing Hikaru showed for Aoi was crushing Koremitsu's chest, and he tried his best to look away from her.
(I can't meet her in the eyes.)
But Hikaru's eyes became increasingly agonized, and Koremitsu's consciousness was gradually focused on Aoi.
So their eyes met.
Enduring the shock in her heart, Aoi had her head lowered as she endured her suffering, placing a hand on her knee onto her other hand.
The eyes were dripping with tears, and at this moment, Aoi looked in Koremitsu's direction, her heart ostensibly pierced.
"!"
Once their eyes met, Aoi widened her eyes in shock, a tear falling as a result.
And the tears began to flow as she hurriedly turned aside and got up.
Honoka was taken aback, and so was Tsuyako.
"Miss Aoi, what is the matter? Wh-why are you crying…?"
"S-sorry…I got, sand in my eyes."
Ekeing those words out, Aoi dashed out of the classroom."
"Miss Aoi!"
"Aoi!"
The moment Koremist wanted to give chase.
"Hold it there, Akagi!"
Honoka yelled, her eyebrows raised as she widened her eyes. She was fuming, but more than that, she was distraught.
And that sadness struck Koremitsu, thunderstruck and perturbed, unable to move.
"…You're really an idiot, Akagi."
Once she muttered this, Honoka gave chase after Aoi.
"Why, can't I…help?"
Koremitsu continued to remain dumbfounded, and Michiru watched him in sadness.
The one clearing the wreckage after all that was Tsuyako.
"Well, Miss Shikibu does seem to understand why Miss Aoi is crying. Please leave it to her for now."
She spoke with the tacticum tone an upperclassman should have.
Hikaru himself watched the door Aoi left from with a clear, anguished expression.

And he kept watching, like an angel with its wings clipped, unable to fly…
◇ ◇ ◇
Neither Honoka nor Aoi returned to the clubroom on that day.
Honoka did send a message to Tsuyako, stating that Aoi's chauffeur would be here to retrieve her bag, and that Honoka will bring their bags to the chauffeur.
They would return home just like that.
There was nothing on Koremitsu's phone, and neither Honoka nor Aoi sent any messages to him.

On the way back at night.
Koremitsu gritted his teeth as he walked down the cold street with the cold breeze blowing at him, clenching his fist and grumbling.
"Tch, why did Aoi cry, and why is Shikibu fuming at me, telling me not to come? Did I really do something? I really don't understand!"
Honoka was an important classmate to him, and Aoi was the one woman important to Hikaru.
Koremitsu wanted to protect both sides no matter what, and would not allow anyone to hurt them.
Once Aoi bawled and raced out of the classroom, Honoka gave Koremitsu a disappointed look, not allowing him to pursue.
Tsuyako did say that Honoka seemed to understand the reason for Aoi's tears.
(What's with her anyway?)
His gut began to wince.
His teeth were gritted too tightly, and his head a little swelling.

"Do you really not have a single clue?"

Hikaru, who remained silent all this while, inquired.
And when Koremitsu turned his head to Hikaru, the latter was staring back sternly.
"You are a little ditzy and dull-witted when it comes to dealing with Asa, but this method does not actually work on all women. At first, you could barely understand a woman's feelings because you had so little interaction with them, that you lacked experience."
With a mature, tacticum tone, he said to a dumbfounded Koremitsu.
"But as of now, you are no longer the same as you were before."
The eyes showing earnest trust reflected Koremitsu's face as the latter curled his lips.
"Koremitsu, the intent you have in dealing with others is neither of arrogance nor callowness, and you are not a coward who pretends to look annoyed. You are a person who will treat others precious to you earnestly without begrudging anyone or regretting."

Hikaru’s white skin and tender hair could be seen clearly under the shimmering silver moon.
It was a forlorn, yet tender and refreshing look.

And the rich voice added on to a layer of melancholy in Koremitsu's heart.
"So do think hard again about why Miss Aoi cried, and why Miss Shikibu was furious. In that case, surely you will understand their feelings. It appears however that there is a thought within you that you cannot approach Miss Aoi any further."
Hikaru's face became increasingly grim, startling Koremitsu.
"That is creating a reverse effect."
And Hikaru spoke with a terrifyingly ominous tone that shook the heart.
"You were attracted by her in such a helpless manner, unable to be forgiven as you wanted to forget. Your heart was latched tightly, never ever able to escape."
Hikaru's eyes became bleak and dreary.
Koremitsu could understand that he was talking about Fujino, and there was a pressure in his heart.
Hikaru fell in love with the stepmother he should not be loving, causing his downfall, and because of her, he gave his life.
"This is from my personal experience."
After chiding with much somberness, Hikaru tried to advise Koremitsu, looking worried for his friend,
"If you do think that Miss Aoi is someone very important to you, Koremitsu, do not create a taboo for yourself, and do not come up with wrong feelings. Convey your true thoughts to Miss Aoi, and love her as a girl. This is a wonderful thing for you and Miss Aoi."
There was some forlornness mixed in Hikaru's steady, tender eyes, and they lingered for quite a while.
Those words pricked at Koremitsu's chest.
"I guess it's impossible…to go after the woman my friend had fallen for since young."
"Koremitsu, I am already dead."
And while Koremitsu yapped away, Hikaru frowned, looking perturbed,
"But there's still more of them, right!? There are still many flower buds drooping around, clinging onto me, right!? And to do that to Aoi in front of you…that's impossible!"
"…"
"If you're to swap positions with me, what will you do!? If I become a ghost, and entrust my most beloved lover to you as my replacement to make her happy, what will you do?"
"Of course, I will become lovers with all of them, and make them happy."
They were discussing about the most depressing thing they had talked about, yet Koremitsu felt that he was too foolish.
Hikaru too watched Koremitsu grimly, conveying that his words were unfiltered and serious, and that caused the latter further troubles.
"Stop answering me so directly, you harem prince! Anyway, what do you mean by all of them!? I don't have any lovers! I'm always alone!"
And just when Koremitsu lashed out.

“Wah!”

He could hear a girl’s voice behind him.
Turning back to look, he found a person collapsed on the floor.
“Is that not Miss Hanasato?”
“What!?”
He hurried over, and found Michiru’s soft hair littered with grass as she was about to get up.
“Hey, you alright?”
“Ah, M-Mr-Mr-Mr-Mr Akagi, you were going so fast…the distance between us was increasing, and I saw you stop, so I tried to approach you, an-and I tripped over.”
“Isn’t your house in the opposite direction?”
Michiru lowered her eyes, looking teary as she grabbed the hem of Koremitsu’s shirt.
“It-it’s the culture festival soon…if I don’t go now, the flowers will…”
“What are you saying now?”
Seeing Michiru act a little strangely, Koremitsu inadvertently felt a chill down his back, and wanted to stand up.
But Michiru tugged at Koremitsu’s shirt, lifting her head up at him like an abandoned puppy.
And then, she pleaded.
“Did you forget the promise we had?”
“Promise?”
“I-if you don’t abide it well…the flowers will be scattered. They’ll wilt in a place nobody can see…! In that case, I’ll…”
Crystalline tears slowly welled in her eyes.
Koremitsu managed to overcome the trauma caused by his mother, but he was still hapless against a girl’s tears. He made Aoi cry, and even Michiru…
Michiru seemed utterly terrified of something as she grabbed onto Koremitsu’s shirt tightly, shivering like a frail flower swaying in a breeze.
“What’s the promise you’re talking about? What’s with you? Did something happen? Tell me everything, Hanasato!”
But no matter how Koremitsu tried to get through to Michiru, the latter closed her eyes and kept shaking her head.
◇ ◇ ◇
In the meantime, Michiru remained silent in thought while Koremitsu carried her and sent her home.
Michiru’s house was a classic, antique build with sturdy doors. Walking down the wall covered with tall trees, the scent of sweet tangerines could be whiffed.
“…T-thanks for sending me back.”
With tears in her eyes, she timidly entered the doors.

After reaching home, Koremitsu soaked himself in the bathtub, asking Hikaru.
“Did I make a promise with Hanasato?”
And in the bathroom filled with mist, Hikaru too answered with a serious look,
“Probably not, I suppose.”

Chapter 5 - I Hate You

As it was the day before the culture festival, classes ended at noon the following day.
Upon seeing Michiru arrive at school with her shoulders slumped and face all gloomy, Koremitsu decided to inquire about the ‘promise’, but things did not go as planned.
“Hey, about the promise you talked about yesterday—”
“You forgot?”
With Michiru staring at him with much despair in the eyes, Koremitsu’s words were stuck in his throat.
If he were to answer here ‘ah, I can’t remember’, he could feel a guilty unease of a compass stabbing at his neck.
And so he had no choice but to play dumb.”
“Ah, erm, it’s not that I actually forgot. I-I just want to confirm. I-is it about the culture festival?”
“Koremitsu, if you wish to lie to someone, you have to act nonchalant, or it will cause suspicion.”
(I’m not good at lying in the first place.)
Back then, his nose would buzz whenever he tried to say what he did not believe in.
Michiru stared at Koremitsu tentatively, and as Hikaru had said, it aroused her suspicions.
Thinking that he would be seen through if he could not continue with the topic, Michiru suddenly changed the topic.
“…The fluorescent lamps are about to fail.”
“Huh?”
“It’s been blinking…for quite a while since just now.”
Koremitsu lifted his head at the ceiling.
And Hikaru too lifted his head.
The 5 fluorescent lamps above them did not flicker.
(Anyway, there’s no need to switch on the lights during the day. It’s definitely going to blink.)
“Look closely. The power’s not switched on.”
“No… it’s flickering. Why do you not understand? Hasn’t anyone noticed it?”
Michiru’s voice was quivering, and with a pale face, she returned to her seat.
“This girl’s a little strange after all.”
“Yes.”
Hikaru too nodded sternly.

Michiru was distracted by the fluorescent lights above during class, lifting her head to peek at it from time to time, only to lower it in trepidation.

(What's the promise about it? What's with the flowers wilting if I don't fulfill it, the lights flickering and so on? I really don't get her.)
Speaking of which, she did say things like 'the flowers wilted', 'what will happen to the scattered flowers' when she laid face up in the classroom.
Back then, Michiru was looking so despondent…
(I don't know what to do myself.)
Michiru was different from the other girls Koremitsu interacted with to complete Hikaru's wishes.
There was too little information.
What exactly was Michiru frustrated about? Yearning for? In any case, what kind of person was Michiru Hanasato? Koremitsu only managed to interact with her for half a year.
Furthermore, Koremitsu only managed to talk with Michiru for approximately 2, 3 months.
(If it's Shikibu…she's Hanasato's friend. Maybe she knows the reason why Hanasato's acting weird.)
Again, Honoka deliberately shunned Koremitsu since morning, never looking at him and never talking to him. She never did explain the reason why she never returned after chasing after Aoi the previous day, and she sat beside Koremitsu, her eyebrows raised as she edited the message with a grim look.
Even if Koremitsu was to consult Honoka about Michiru, perhaps Honoka did not want to discuss about this in any case.
(But Shikibu isn't the type to abandon her friends.)
Even though the situation between her and Michiru was a little awkward, surely Honoka would assist if Michiru was in any trouble. Koremitsu still trusted this woman called Honoka Shikibu.)
Yes, she may look aloof, but if he was to secretly pass a message to her telling her what he wanted to talk about…
Koremitsu fished out the phone from his pocket, and began to compose the message under the table.
Soon after he sent the message, Honoka's fingers stopped.
And she deleted it without reading the content.
She was staring at the screen, her lips sealed as she seemed to ponder about something.
Koremitsu stuck his leg out, kicking the leg of Honoka's chair.
"!"
Honoka's shoulders jolted, and she stared at Koremitsu.
Her eyebrows were raised as she stared him, but Koremitsu's temples were pulsating, basically saying 'read the message'. And so, Honoka unwillingly opened the message he sent.
Hanasato's weird.
I want to talk.
Come to the rooftop once classes end.

The words were few, but Honoka kept staring at the screen, widening her eyes slightly, before fiddling her fingers again.

Koremitsu kept waiting on the rooftop with Hikaru beside him, and then, he spotted a girl with the hem of her skirts fluttering, as Honoka appeared in front of him with a scowl.
“Thank goodness! You came!”
“It’s not for your sake, Akagi. I’m a little curious about Michiru. She just went to the janitor saying that the fluorescent lamps are spoiled, and asked him to swap them…even though that’s not the case.”
Honoka said so awkwardly.
Her tone was such, and even her face was aloof, not meeting Koremitsu in the eyes. Even so, Koremitsu was delighted that Honoka did come to the roof after reading his message.
He talked about Michiru’s eccentric actions till this point, and Honoka tilted her head aside, looking peeved as she listened.
“She fell asleep face up in the classroom, and starting from yesterday, started to talk about the flowers wilting or something. Now that I think back about it, Hanasato has changed before then. She gave me honey sweets when we were working together. I don’t mind if it’s once in a while, but I already said that I can’t handle sweets, but she said that’s not the case, and gave me such honey sweets every day.”
Honoka frowned furiously.
“I know…I saw Michiru giving them to you during noon break. You ate it up very carefully.”
“I’m swallowing it little by little when I can’t taste a single thing.”
Honoka looked a little perturbed in the eyes, and she scowled.
“I suppose…so. You prefer the spicy flavors though. I was finding it a little strange that Michiru said that you like honey, so she wanted you to try some of her sweets. She was really enthusiastic about it…”
(She said, I like honey…?)
Koremitsu never did say such a thing before.
Typically, the one liking honey was not Koremitsu.
(Wait, did Hanasato,)
Koremitsu ruffled his head as he stared at Hikaru, floating in front as the latter overheard their conversation. Hikaru too lowered his head at Koremitsu, ostentiously realizing something.
(Did Hanasato—somehow think of me as Hikaru or something?)

“The fingers…are so hard and bony…and they’re large…firm.”

Upon recalling the sight of Michiru touching Koremitsu’s stiff fingers with such anguish, Koremitsu heart jolted.
Hikaru’s hand was different from Koremitsu, as effeminate and silky.
At that moment, Michiru was comparing between them…

“Hey, did Hanasato think of me as Hikaru or something?”
Once he noted so curtly, Honoka looked dumbfounded, and her face, originally turned aside, immediately turned towards Koremitsu.
“Are you an idiot!? How do you resemble Lord Hikaru in any way? You don’t!”
“No, I mean she has the image of me as Hikaru’s friend being Hikaru.”
“You two don’t match! Not at all! If you’re going to say such things, Lord Hikaru’s legion of fans are going to pelt you with rotten eggs!”
(Ack, she actually said it to that point…it’s true thought that I don’t have a princely vibe at all.)
He glanced aside at Hikaru floating in the air, and sneered apologetically..
And Honoka, who quietly clicked her tongue, found her face too close to Koremitsu’s, and abruptly turned it around.
“A-Also, Michiru isn’t actually Lord Hikaru’s fan. If I have to say, she hates him.”
“Eh? Someone actually doesn’t like him?”
“Koremitsu, did you just chuckle a little at the end? Are you actually chuffed to bits that I am hated by a woman?”
Hikaru asked with a conflicted tone.
“She’s not exactly antagonistic towards him, but back when everyone was discussing day and night over Lord Hikaru, she would quietly leave. Whenever Lord Hikaru’s surrounded by girls, she would go walk another path.”
“Is that true? She once talked about her white knight, so doesn’t Hikaru actually meet her demands?”
After hearing Koremitsu’s words, Honoka was left seething.
“Yeah, Michiru did like having white knights, but right now, as to why she has fallen for someone like you, I-I did swear that I’ll work hard to pair Michiru with the one she likes, so even now, I still want to cheer for her.”
Once she said this, she became frantic and helpless, so unlike her usual self.
“Wait, Hanasato likes me!?”
Koremitsu widened his eyes, and the moment he said that, he got kicked in the stomach.
“Ugh!”
This sudden impact rendered his feet unsteady, and his body bent in two.
“What are you playing dumb for!? Aren’t you already doing those things I said!? Yo-you really aren’t reliable at all! Enough already! You’re an idiot, a bonehead, Akagi! Doofus!”
“…Koremitsu, I do have the same thoughts as Miss Shikibu. I did say that you are not dull-witted before, but I suppose I should correct myself, no?”
(Hey! Stop sighing too! Stop looking so shocked, Hikaru! Like I can do anything about that! I was shunned by girls since kindergarten, and I lack experience!)

Honoka had her eyebrows raised , still fuming, and her widened eyes were a little teary. Upon seeing such a scene, Koremitsu felt a little nauseated, his body crumpled.
“!!! Seriously, why does it have to be you! Not only Michiru, but Her Highness Aoi too. Why…actually, I really don’t want to cheer for either side, and to you, I too—but I had enough. My mind’s completely blank. I don’t know what I’m thinking now.”
And with his temples throbbing, Koremitsu yelled.
“YOU SAID THAT YOU LIKE ME, SO WHY ARE YOU CHEERING FOR OTHER GIRLS!?”
“Haa…!”
Honoka’s jaw dropped, and she was left speechless.
Her face was immediately flushed, and tears welled in her eyes.
“…You…you…”
Honoka was ostensibly filled with conflicted emotions, either furious, startled, or ready to break down into tears.
“…Akagi, you idiot.”
She contorted her eyes, trying her best to hold that contorted face, lips and eyebrows, and feebly said,
“W-why are you able to say such a thing so easily? It-it’s because of you, being like that…th-that I…”
She blinked her eyes, her throat buzzing, and with quivering lips, she whispered.
“You…really do whatever you want.”
Thinking about how to answer this, Koremitsu was left guilty.
And just when he was about to express himself formally.

“!!”

Honoka’s eyes shuddered suddenly.
Her face contorted she was gasping for breath.
Koremitsu was taken aback by her expression, and did not know what happened. Hikaru’s fleeting voice could be heard from behind.
“Miss…Aoi.”

(Aoi!)

Koremitsu too turned his head around with bated breath.
Aoi was leaning on the door, looking extremely pale.
With her lips tightly sealed, Honoka frowned and lowered her head. She then lifted it again, adamantly.
“Have a talk with Her Highness Aoi!”
She let out shrill words at Koremitsu’s ears, and strode forth towards the door with the hem of her skirt and the bright brown hair swaying, moving her slender, straight legs.

Honoka seemed to say something when she brushed by Aoi, and the latter's shoulders jolted, looking ready to break down.
Honoka passed through the door, and vanished.
And in contrast, an obviously nervous Aoi came over.
Koremitsu's heart raced, his throat still a little suffocated as the heat in his brain was turned up.
The distance between them decreased little by little.
The sun at noon blazed upon them like a dagger, and the sky was so blue it was dazzling.
Koremitsu's heart was pounding furiously, practically about to pop out from his mouth.
Hikaru, who should be behind Koremitsu, was probably feeling no different as well, or perhaps he was calmly observing them.
Hikaru did say, You are a person who will treat others precious to you earnestly without begrudging anyone or regretting.
So since Aoi was someone precious to him, Koremitsu wanted Aoi to know of his true feelings.
(But..what are my true feelings?)
And upon facing Aoi on the roof, Koremitsu realized.
What he was truly hoping for.
Aoi stopped in front of Koremitsu.
Her petite body kept shivering, and her thin, black hair was swaying in the autumn breeze.
Hikaru's white, pure Hollyhock.
The one and only important girl who was supposed to be united with Hikaru.
Hikaru's hope.
Back when she had yet to open her heart to Koremitsu, Aoi was beside the window in the arts classroom, saying 'I do not wish to talk with boys'.
She was obstinate, had a clean streak, and never did show a smile no matter how much Koremitsu tried his best to do so.

—And that's why I say women!

He did not know exactly how many times he said those words.
Koremitsu intended to finish the work of delivering Hikaru's presents to her, and never to get involved in her afterwards.
But when he held her hand in Hikaru's place, when they went to play at the theme park, Koremitsu saw Aoi's honest, innocent self.
For the first time, he felt that his antithesis, the creatures known as women, were cute and needed much care. The one who taught him that, was Aoi,
And so, Aoi finally opened her heart to Koremitsu, accepting his goodwill.

—Good morning, Mr. Akagi.

—Actually, you can talk to me.

—Can I send messages to you?

There was Aoi, with her cheeks slightly flushed, smiling bashfully.
It was a maidenly voice.
The eyes were so innocent as she lifted her head.
Those were things Koremitsu never saw before, like a blooming white flower in the middle of a barren land, and Koremitsu really had the urge to protect her—
But from the moment Aoi clasped her petite hand on Koremitsu's stiff, icy hand, Aoi, who had been shielded, ended up shielding and protecting Koremitsu's inner heart.
It was so filled with pain, memories, forgiveness and chaos, and the moment the emotions were intertwined, Koremitsu found himself utterly mesmerized by Aoi.
(But Aoi is Hikaru's…)
Aoi opened her pale lips, shivering as she said,
"I-I heard it all, back then, yesterday, what you said to Asa in the student council office, Mr. Akagi, that you would never ever like me."
Koremitsu felt a hammer pound his head.
Did Aoi hear all that!?
So in other words, Honoka, who accompanied Aoi to the student council office, did—
"Th-that's because…Saiga suddenly said some weird things…I can't ever like you because you're someone precious to Hikaru, so I can't have indecent thoughts about you…I'm not saying anything bad about you."
Cold sweat trickled down his best.
Devastated, Aoi lifted her head at Koremitsu.
The large, quixotic eyes were basically saying, those were not the words she wanted to hear.
However, those were the words Koremitsu could only think of.
His feelings for Aoi were blazing like a fever, and his teeth biting at his lower lips as he prepared himself to say that he could not see Aoi as a lover.

—That will not do, Koremitsu.

Echoing in Koremitsu's mind was Hikaru's foreboding voice.

—That is creating a reverse effect.

"Mr. Akagi."
Aoi's face was contorted as she called out Koremitsu's name despondently.
At that moment, the blood flowing in Koremitsu's body boiled, his body seething.

—You were attracted by her in such a helpless manner, unable to be forgiven as you wanted to forget..
Just as when he yelled at Asai, saying that he surely would never fall in love with Aoi.
His emotions were reaching his throat, unable to be contained.
He was angsty as he was unable to rein in the emotions, and when he saw Aoi shiver and lift her head, his yearning of her was aroused. He really wanted to embrace her, to protect her.

—Your heart was latched tightly, never ever able to escape.

Even his breathing because arduous.
His heart was ostensibly taken.
That his all was approaching a single person,
And that he could not think at all!

—This is from my personal experience.

Koremitsu reached his hand out to Aoi.
And at that moment of despair.
Aoi took a step back, exclaiming,
“I-I do not have any intentions about you at all…! I really hate you, Mr. Akagi!”
And Koremitsu’s hand stopped in front of Aoi.
His body went from hot to cold, and the impulse that dominated the heart gradually faded away.
Looking apprehensive, she gave Koremisu a feeble look.
“I…really want to say this to you…I really hate you. I-I really, really hate you…I really abh..”

The final words remained stuck in her throat, and again, she turned around and scampered away as she did the previous day.

Koremitsu's legs wobbled, and he immediately tumbled over.

His body was as mushy as mud.
"I suppose…it is unbearable to have Miss Aoi say she despises you."
Hikaru appeared beside Koremitsu without warning, and the latter stared at the door forlornly as he noted demurely.
"I suppose…I'm really useless."
And so, he remained limp on the scorching concrete, ruffling his hair with his hands as he collapsed his shoulders, spread his shoulders wide, and lowered his head hard.
It was neither Aoi's intentions nor Honoka's he could not comprehend.
It was his own.
Whether it was his impulsive urge to embrace Aoi or driven by a screaming Honoka, he said such obstinate words, and felt so remorseful it was ripping his guys. Even he did not know what he would say or do the next time.
He was moved by Honoka, and impressed upon by Aoi; however, he was rejected by both parties no matter who he wanted to choose, and he remained so incompetent.
(Wh-what's the matter with me!? Was I ever so timid before…? I'm really so stupid. What exactly am I doing here…?)
There was Honoka, almost breaking down in tears as she muttered 'you idiot'.
Aoi too showed such a face as she exclaimed "I hate you" before turning to leave.
To love, to hate; surely it would be more convenient if the world had such terms that defined things in black and white.
However, Koremitsu already understood the weight of the word 'like', and the hidden, conflicted feelings in the word 'hate'.
(Seriously, what am I doing here…)
"Damn it, I really want to meet Yū!"
He continued to ruffle his head, eking a call.
There was the feeble, dreamy girl who crouched in the dark apartment, dreaming away, like a fish sleeping at the bottom of the sea.
That was the fleeting first love Koremitsu had that vanished in a trice.

—When we meet the next time, I'll show that I've become a girl who likes to smile.

She did her best to smile radiantly when they went their separate ways.
Back then, he assumed he would never have fallen heads over heels for a person in such a manner for the second time.

Whenever it rained, he recalled the scene of them holding hands, watching the blue flowers bloom, and his heart would ooze sweetness.
But after bidding farewell to summer, and as the autumn winds cooled, his memories of Yū gradually faded. He still loved her, but whenever rain came, the unfathomable melancholy gradually faded.

(I wonder…if Yū's doing well in Australia.)

There was no letter or message.
Yū said that she did not need Koremitsu, and the latter did say that it was fine if she could begin her life anew. If there was anything painful for her, he said that he would fly over to her and find her no matter where he was.
If he was to meet Yū again, this veil of ambiguity would vanish along with the smoke.
And that would clearly indicate what the conflicted feelings were about.
Tranquil and forlorn, Hikaru noted,
"Perhaps you should meet her…just elope…head to an island nobody else knows of , and only have eyes for each other,, and…love as you watch over each other…"
"Idiot…how's that possible for me…?"
Just when Koremitsu refuted with his head lowered,
A shrill bell rang in the school.
"What now? A fire!?"
Koremitsu got up in an instant.
♢ ♢ ♢
Once news came that the fire alarm was a hoax, Koremitsu returned to the classroom, and found his classmates in confusion.
"Th-this is really bad."
"Wh-wh-wha-what do we do?"
"Are you fuming, Akagi?"
"I-i-i-it-it-it's not our fault!"
"But he's furious! We'll be killed!"
"Noo! Don't!"
"Le-le-let's run away now."
And the moment they spotted him, the classroom went dead silent.
Koremitsu too scanned the classroom, flabbergasted, and Hikaru too gulped softly.
(Horrible…)
The floor, tables and blackboards were drenched.
And furthermore, the cardboard sets they diligently worked on were completely soaked.
Michiru, dressed in a half-sleeved gym shirt and half pants, and for some reason, covering her hair with a nurse cap, flusteredly explained the situation to Koremitsu.

“It-it looks like the sprinklers were faulty…and the water splashed out, becoming like this. Everyone went out to shop, so there wasn’t anyone in the classroom, and we couldn’t move the sets out in time…”
But even if anyone was around, no way would they be able to prevent the sets from being wet.
The soaked cardboard were soft and limp, unable to stand at all, and the paintings on them were dissolved by water. The vengeful spirit on the window became vague as a result, and even the appearance had collapsed, identifying it was impossible.
“So-so-so-so-sor-sor-sorry, Mr. Akagi. It’s my fault for going to the Japanese Dance Club and leaving the classroom empty.”
Michiru suddenly burst into tears, apologizing.
The classmates were all terrified, fearing that Koremitsu would explode upon learning that the prop sets, which they made by staying behind after school, were ruined. With pale faces, they stared towards Koremitsu with apprehension.
“Hey…what’s with Miss Shikibu?”
“Honoka’s probably the only one able to stop Akagi now!”
“I think she went to the photography, shogi, ballet and handball club to discuss stuff.”
“Please hurry back, Miss Shikibu!”
There was such mutters going on.
Koremitsu raised his eyebrows, his temples and cheeks pulsating as he pouted his lips, glaring at the soaked sets.
Till this point, he shed much blood and tears.
The only memories he had of the culture festivals were all bad, and he did not really like them at first, to a point one would say he abhorred them.
However, he was suddenly tasked to be a committee member of the culture festival.
The little bird envelopes contained information that assisted him, but his classmates did not look like they wanted to be involved, and nobody would have bothered with him if he did not give clear instructions with decisiveness.
Basically, the work was done only by Koremitsu and Michiru, and everyone else slacked off on the first day. On the second day, he went to coax one by one, and finally managed to gather everyone to work, with the prop sets almost taking shape…
Koremitsu was barely able to get along with his classmates, and yet everyone was shunning him in apprehension.
This was completely different from the ‘culture festival’ Koremitsu imagined. The surrounding students were afraid of him as they worked with him, and perhaps they were not happy at all.
But even so, he worked together with Michiru the previous day, and when he saw them at the point of near-completion, there was something surging in his heart.

Either way, Koremitsu clearly felt involved in the preparation of the culture festival, and he really was grateful to Michiru and the sender for helping him.
He wanted to continue on as it was, and make the culture festival a success.
It was a little different from the feelings of what those born winners in life would enjoy in the festival.
That was what he felt back then.
But the scene appearing in front of him was of soaked, limp cardboard, and fudged illustrations—
"Koremitsu…to put it…I understand how you feel. The sets you worked so hard on can no longer be used, and the culture festival tomorrow is wasted…"
Hikaru consoled.
And Koremitsu hissed,
"…How can we give up now."
Hikaru was shocked, and the classmates' shoulders jerked.
"M-M-M-M-M-M-M-Mr. Akagi, no-nobody else's at fault here! The one at fault is me for being in charge and not being in the classroom. So-so-so, please calm down!"
Michiru stood in front of Koremitsu, shrieking as she appeared to shield her classmates.
"Stop apologizing! I'm not blaming anyone!"
Michiru widened her eyes.
Their classmates shriveled, fearing that the onslaught was beginning.
But Koremitsu ignored them as he raised his voice further, his eyebrows raised,
"NOBODY COULD HAVE PREDICTED THE FIRE ALARM TO GO HAYWIRE, AND WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT! WE CAN'T USE THESE, AND I'M PISSED AND ALL, BUT WE CAN ONLY DO THIS ALL OVER AGAIN! NO POINT IN DISCUSSING WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO! WE'RE JUST WASTING TIME! LET'S GET TO WORK!"
"B-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu Mr. Akagi, the materials are already."
"Hanasato, you're on good terms with the janitors, right? See if you can get any usable materials for them. Those two guys down there! Go down to the student council office to explain. That president Matriarch Asa's someone fair and capable, so make her do some stuff to. If she's unwilling to help, tell her that I'll reveal those things if she doesn't do so! Those 5 guys down there, move those cardboard that can't be used, and wipe the floor. Hurry!"
Koremitsu barked orders.
"Yes, understood!"
"Got it!"
And after these responses, they ran out.
"How can we just give up here! Damn it! The culture festival has yet to start!"
Yes! How can they just give up without giving their all until the bitter end?

“Whatever excuses we can make about being unable to make it, leave it when we really can’t make it!”
“Koremitsu! I support you!”
“Yeah, just stand by the side and pray.”
The classroom was suddenly bustling with live.
All the idle people ended up busting their all working, with no exceptions.
Michiru gave a call asking for some materials from the janitors, and got a few people to move them.
The student council too was about to give help.
“I shall make you repay this favor, Mr. Akagi.”
“Yeah, I don’t mind even if I have to cosplay as Santa Claus.”
And with that response, Asai was left red faced.

Once she heard that the cardboard sets in the classroom were rendered unusable, Honoka, discussing about the ballet performance that was to occur the following day, returned in a jiffy. She. Went back, worrying if Koremitsu was feeling down in the classroom, only to find her classmates scurrying around, some sticking dry cardboard on the soaked ones, some ironing the materials and some using bamboo poles to hang them.
None of them looked devastated as they kept calling each other and worked with all their might.
“Mr Akagi, th-the repairs here are done.”
“Okay, there’s still a pile there.”
“M-Mr Akagi, are the ones at the windows okay?”
“Great. I’ll leave that side to you.”
The classmates, who used to shun Koremitsu, let alone avert their eyes from him, were obeying his orders.
Koremitsu kept addressing the problems everywhere, so busy as he cut and pasted cardboard; perhaps he never realized the admiring looks from his classmaes.
As usual, he simply tried to pass this hurdle with simple brute force.
(Seriously…you really defied my expectations…)
Honoka heaved a sigh of relief, blinking her eyes, and left the classroom with a smile to continue with her previous work.

The number of people the student council sent over to help got increasingly fewer, and the sky outside the window got increasingly darker as the patchwork labyrinth was finally completed.
“M-Mr Akagi, the sets are completed, but we don’t have time to change the illustrations.”
One of his male classmates said, sweating all over.
As he said, the colors on both sides of the sets were fudged. They all looked over at him, wondering what to do.
“We won’t be doing the Western style. We’ll be doing Japanese.”

Koremitsu clarified as he prepared a bucket filled to the brim with ink and a thick brush he borrowed from the calligraphy club. He set up the marble, and wrote on it.
The words were all terrifying, vengeance, hate, and with all his muscles, he moved his body, extending his hand as he got down to writing them.
The stoppings were firm, the splashings sharp, the brushstrokes were straight, and the dots were bold!
The wall was gradually filled with powerful words, and his classmates stared, dumbfounded.
"You really showcased your ability, hero."
Hikaru muttered.
(Shut up.)
Koremitsu grumbled in his heart as continued to write.

Michiru was standing alone behind the classmates, and Koremitsu never did notice that she was staring at him with forlorn eyes.
"…"
Her eyes were filled with tears.
♢ ♢ ♢
It was already 1 hour beyond the school's permitted time for dismissal when they were done with their work.
Asai deemed this one hour to be an exception, and got the teachers' permit.
Everyone was blushing in happiness as they looked at the completed maze.
"Amazing…I thought it wasn't done."
"It feels…more intimidating than before."
"Yeah, feels like a vengeful spirit will really pop out from the words."
They chirped away, and after they left…
Koremitsu and Hikaru were left lethargic as they looked at the maze.
"It is finally completed, Koremitsu."
"You idiot, the culture festival hasn't started. Tomorrow's the key."
"Yes, surely it will be an unforgettable day. I do look forward to it."
Hikaru giggled.
"Let's go back, Hikaru."
"Ah, are you a little shy?"
"Like I am!"
The stiff-faced response echoed down the silent corridor.
Only Koremitsu's footsteps could be heard, and all the classrooms were decorated intricately for the culture festival, with some flowers placed in the large vases at the stairwell.
The sweet scent engulfed Koremitsu's nose.
"Ah, Fragrant Olives."
Hikaru stared at the orange flowers, beaming,
"These Fragrant Olives appear to have absorbed the essence of the stairs, snickering away. Upon whiffing the scent, surely I will naturally think 'ah,

autumn is here'. Also, there is a power in this fragrance that arouses my memories. For example…"
"No wonder I tthought there's the smell of the toilet air fresheners."
"Toilet…"
Hikaru, who was boasting his knowledge, could only sigh.
Truly, a lot of things happened on this day.
Koremitsu recalled about Honoka and Aoi, his heart aching.
Also, there was Michiru…she never greeted him when he returned, and vanished without him knowing. Perhaps nothing did happen to her.
The sweet scent of Fragrant Olives caused much heartache.
"Doesn't this scent stink?"
Koremitsu grumbled, and as he went to change his shoes,
"Huh?"
There was a white paper folded into a flower, left quietly in his outdoor shoes.

—I call that person the White Flower.

"Hey, this is!"
Koremitsu picked it up and looked back, and Hikaru too looked flabbergasted."
"Koremitsu, open it."
"O-open it?"
"Open it, and see if there is any message inside."
Following what Hikaru said, Koremitsu anxiously opened this piece of paper that was folded in a complicated manner,

"The cuckoo in the village where the orange blossoms fall sings and sings on many and many a day." (TN: Manyoshu 1473, when literally namedrops 'Hanachirusato'. Translation copied, but I'll leave a reference note at the author's notes)

After seeing the words lined the same way as it was on the little birds envelopes, Koremitsu gasped.
(Is the 'white flower' that saved Hikaru the same as 'the bird'!? Then, Shikibu's—)
Honoka transferred into Heian Academy during Middle School.
So she was not the one who sent the little bird envelopes!
And while Koremitsu lowered his head to read, Hikaru stared at it grimly, seemingly affirming something as he slowly said,
"The white 5 petal flowers…scent…blossoms…cuckoo…ah, I see, I see."

Chapter 6 - There's a Red-haired Demon at the Heian Academy

“Be careful, Big Brother Koremitsu! Shiiko will be there later!”
It was the morning of the culture festival.
With the beaming Shioriko and the stoic Lapis sending him off at the door, Koremitsu got up earlier than usual.
Once he got to school, he arrived at the empty classroom.
He slipped on the ‘Special Security group’ armband he received from Asai.
And after that, he cautiously set the alarm of his cellphone.
“Okay, let’s go.”
And with that, he said that with vigor.

The culture festival of Heian Academy started after the fireworks display. The high school, middle school and elementary school campuses had their doors opened to ticket holders, so that the latter would enter and marvel at the traditional school of elegance of the autumn roses blooming in the exquisite garden.
The school garden contained classic shops like crepes and takoyaki, and other items being sold included Sablés with candy on them, almond Florentine biscuits, raisins with crumples like the drapes of a skirt, plum-filled cakes—Gugelhupf, a western delicacy, Kiritanpo from Akita, and set meals of Okinawa’s soba noodles and purple yam. These were stalls rarely seen at a typical culture festival.
Furthermore, there were also classes who commemorated the premature death of the school prince Hikaru Mikado by having concerts for Lord Hikaru, love dramas themed after him, photo exhibitions of him, and even a school flower map themed ‘The journey of Lord Hikaru’s favorite flowers’. The festival was far livelier than it was in prior years.

“Mr. Akagi! As I said before, I’ll be collecting materials from you, so please take care of me!”
“Ack, you’re here!? But I’m really busy here!”
Koremitsu was squeezed amongst the school girls and some female visitors, jostling for ‘Lord Hikaru’s treasured photos’.
“Hey! Line up in fours! No cutting queues! You can’t buy them if you don’t have the numbered tickets!”
He bellowed.
“It’s dangerous here, Oumi. Go over there!”
“I’m grateful that you’re worried about me, Mr. Akagi, but I’m already very used to such a situation.”
“Hey you, over there! Stop squeezing in! I told you to line up in fours! Ah damn it, the numbered tickets are gone! Hurry and get some more!”

“Mr. Akagi, I just got intel on my phone that there’s a student from another school fighting against one of ours in front of classroom 2-3.”
“What!?”
‘Please assist.’ Koremitsu’s phone too picked up the SOS request from the in-charge of the security group
He ruffled his hair, and found a waitress in an apron and another girl dressed in plainclothes.
“Kazu’s going out with me! You sly vixen!”
“You’re the only one thinking about that!”
They were volleying abuse upon each other as a catfight broke out. A member of the security team was sprawled on the floor, an eye swollen due to being punched.
“The ones fighting now aren’t guys, but girls now!?”
Hikaru gently whispered from above,
“Ah, the girl in plainclothes is of the cheerleader squad from Sakuragaoka High School, Miss Yumkia Kojima. She is like a Red Spider Lily, swaying along with the breeze with so much affection, but she really is an innocent girl at heart. Miss Yumika did ask me for love consultation, and we kept talking while riding on this good mood until the following morning…”
“She’s an ex of yours, huh?”
“The girl dressed in the waitress outfit is the second year, Miss Tsuru Ikenohata of the tea ceremony club. She does give off a distinct vibe of a Lily of the Valley. She was perturbed by her boyfriend’s casanova antics, and when she consulted me, she once—”
“Ack, the other one too!?”
Startled, Koremitsu butted into their argument, and spread his arms wide to pry them apart.
“Enough already, you two!”
He bellowed, snorting as a result.
“Wahh!!”
“Save me!!!”
For some reason, both parties shrieked.
They were crouching on the floor, shivering as they apologized profusely, and the girl in plain clothes hurriedly scurried away thereafter.
“I guess this is to be expected of you, Mr. Akagi, for settling this in an instant.”
Hiina then diverted her cellphone at him, taking a few photos. Koremitsu looked very conflicted.
“Ah, Mr. Akagi! We got two indecent guys at class 3-4’s ‘Japanese Festival House’, harassing a waitress and not leaving.”
“Upstairs now!?’
Koremitsu dashed up the stairs, and ducked through the corridor as the crowd parted to the sides.
“Ohh, as expected of you!”
And Hiina too took a photo of this scene as she tailed him.

Upon arriving at the Festival House, he faced the 2 harassers,
“We still have people at the back. Do you mind leaving if you got nothing?”
He hissed,
“Ack! Akagi!?”
“The 27th boss!!”
The two males shrieked.
It appeared they heard of Koremitsu in his pomp during middle school.
Someone probably caused trouble for Koremitsu, and got punished heavily as a result.
“W-w-w-we got nothing!”
“Y-yeah, we’re getting ready to leave!”
With their backs arched, they snuck through the door.
“Don’t you dare woo girls in our school!”
Koremitsu bellowed,
“Ohh, the infamy of the delinquent king is off the charts!”
“You sent them running with a glare, Koremitsu! That is amazing! The legend of you defeating 10 delinquents with a single glare is really true!!”
Both Hiina and Hikaru marveled effervescently.
(I beat 10 delinquents with a single glare? Do my eyes look like they fire lasers or something?)
Surely Koremitsu was feeling very conflicted.
“Mr. Akagi, the intel this time is that there’s a little girl crying in the corridor of the courtyard!”
“Why is it that your cellphone’s receiving news faster than me!?”
“This is the result of me setting up my network far and wide!”
This time, they hurried down the stairs, and found a little girl sobbing away, shouting “mama mama!”. Koremitsu became her protectorate, and went around asking, “Does anyone know who’s the mother!?”
He put the girl on his shoulders without uttering a single word, and this caused the girl to cry.
“Mama! Save me!”
“Koremitsu, will it not be faster to use the PA system?”
“Mr. Akagi, this really is quite the interesting image, but maybe you should try broadcasting through the school?”
“Makes sense.”
On the way to the broadcasting studio,
“Luna!”
A young, glamorous looking mother came rushing over.
“Mama!”
Koremitsu handed the girl over, and the mother embraced her tightly,
“Thank goodness. I heard that a boy looking like a terrorist abducted a girl, so I was wondering if it was you. I was so anxious.”
She rattled off,
“Sorry for having the face of a terrorist!”

“It has been a while, Miss Satomi. So this girl is Luna? She really has grown up. When I was dating Miss Satomi, Luna was still learning baby talk. Ah, Miss Satomi is as alluring as a Japanese Iris, one of the old girls of our school. The enthusiastic single mother raising little Luna alone does look cute panicking…”
“Another one of your girls!?”
Koremitsu roared. The mother was started, and the little girl hurriedly hid behind her,
“So-sorry to trouble you!”
Before lowering her head and scampering away.
“…Sure is nice to have a family.”
Hiina chimed in tenderly.
The raptured emotions slowly spread in her cheeks and lips.
And even though he was mistaken for an abductor, it did not matter to Koremitsu after seeing such a blissful look, whispering,
“Yeah…you’re right.”
“Miss Satomi has yet to change. It really is great that she is still full of life.”
Hikaru too looked elated.
Hiina stared at her phone,
“You got work, Mr. Akagi. Lord Hikaru’s Premiere Bromide is already sold out. The ladies will yap if you don’t hurry with a new batch, or even start a ruckus—”
“Hey you, stop right there!”
Koremitsu bellowed as he dashed off to where he was first in-charge of.

And so, Koremitsu was scrambling around as a member of the security team, settling arguments, directing people, and even helping with his ‘Haunted House’.
There were lots of crowd around, perhaps, because the massive commotion the prior day became an attraction.
“I heard this maze was done in a day.”
“Eh, that’s impressive.”
“The words here look really intimidating.”
“Like Hoichi the Earless.”
The response was positive.
And once the walls turned, the cast dressed in white robes and words doodled over their faces appeared in front of them.
”Waahhh!!”
“Nooo!!”
Shrieks could be heard.
Those words were written by Koremitsu early in the morning.
“Koremitsu! This is really, really amazing! Listen, there are more shrieks!”
“Stop getting excited and yapping away. You should have been used to that, right?”

A human soul made of red cellophane suddenly appeared from the set, holding a light that was swaying by the end of a rod, muttering this. However, he really was a little delighted with that.
When Koremitsu returned to his position as a member of the security team, the boys in his class said coyly,
“Go-good work there, Mr. Akagi.”
Koremitsu himself felt elated.
“Y-yeah.”

According to Hiina’s report, Honoka was assisting the volleyball club in an exhibition match, and it was the climax.
“Our school representatives have cat ears on, and our opponents have dog ears.”
“What’s that about?”
“It’s the culture festival after all. Also, all the participants in the handball match later on have to wearing tiny miniskirts.”
“That’s no longer handball, is it?”
“Cute is justice.”
Hiina snickered.
“Are you going to cheer her on? Mr. Akagi?”
“No time for that. Got to go for the Japanese Dance Club, and I still have lots of work as part of the security team. I guess I don’t have time for lunch at all.”
“Oh? This does seem a little different from my copy of your schedule today.”
“Some got sick and took leave, so the initial plan had some sudden changes.”
“Now that’s troublesome.”
“So I say, I can’t go watch the volleyball and handball matches.”
He noted as he cautiously stared at his watch.
“Really? That is a pity.”
“I do feel the same too. I have yet to see Miss Shikibu playing volleyball while wearing cat ears. Her legs are long and pretty, and if she is to play handball while wearing a miniskirt, the spectators will surely have some nice scenery to view.”
Hikaru probably was imagining that scene, narrowing his eyes as he said that. He then beamed heartily.
“Well, you do not have a choice anyway. You are everyone’s Koremitsu for today.”
Koremitsu continued to maintain a frown as he kept quiet.
◇ ◇ ◇
(Is Akagi helping at the classroom at this time?)
Honoka recalled the words Koremitsu said to her the day prior as she returned an exhilarating spike back to the opponent’s court.
(You said you like me, so why are you backing someone else…that’s so stubborn of him.)

You're the one who said that I'm fooling around, but don't just stand around and say that. Are you kidding me?
(I'm bothered too.)
Ever since Honoka entered this school in Middle School, Michiru was an important friend to her. And this Michiru, who too was inept at dealing with the opposite gender, and fell in love.
She did her best to change her appearance, for Koremitsu's sake.
Honoka herself could not betray Michiru as the latter was.
Michiru however was being queer. Was she not getting along with Koremitsu?
Again, Michiru looked lethargic in the morning.
Even if anything earth-shattering was to happen, "Good morning." she would greet others cheerfully.
However, she did not greet anyone on this day, and her face was pale as she lowered her head.
As Honoka herself was busy with her own matters, she could not involve herself.
(Sorry, Michiru. I lied to you. I like the same person.)
However, Honoka's lovelorn might have been inevitable.
Before the match began, she met Aoi, dressed in a nurse uniform, at the beverage stand run by the Japanese Dance Club. Like Michiru, Aoi too looked lethargic.
Honoka did not ask what Koremitsu and Aoi talked about on the roof, but after seeing the somber look, she had a rough gist of it, and never tried to ask.
Surely, Koremitsu must have said something about a friend's most important woman being off limits or something.
Surely, he was a foolish, obstinate, useless person.
(Akagi, I really want to tell you the truth, and even if I'm not the one liking you…I don't want to be misunderstood by you. After hearing your explanation, I guess you never will give up easily in times of trouble.)
Honoka leapt high, and spiked down the tall lofting ball.
And then, she found herself to be hypocritical with what she said.
For Honoka herself did say some misconstrued things to Koremitsu and Michiru.
◇ ◇ ◇
(What is Mr. Akagi doing at the moment…)
Aoi blended the fruits, honey and milk together as she kept thinking about Koremitsu.
The beverage stand was clustered with queues, partly because the cosplay outfits of the Japanese Dance Club beverage stand was announced beforehand by the news club, and partly because of the expectations.
Honoka had to take part in the volleyball exhibition match, and took off her uniform off soon after wearing it. To make up for this regret, Tsuyako

showed off her extremely alluring, tight fit miniskirt nurse uniform, causing the males crowding to fall heads over heels for her.
And Michiru, here to take Honoka's place at the stall, was as gloomy as Aoi was. Tsuyako was the only one beaming away.
Aoi felt so incompetent and worried for leaving the entire stall to Tsuyako.
When the proposal to open the beverage stand was made, they all had their own duties assigned.
And even if it was for a little while, Aoi simply wanted to experience the culture festival along with Koremitsu.
But when she accidentally overheard Koremitsu telling Asai "Aoi is the only one I won't love", she felt so unbearable within, and even though she wanted to pretend nothing happened, she ran away crying upon seeing that Koremitsu was unable to calm down. On the next day, she again said some harsh words to him.
(I hate him…I never thought about that.)
She said she would never be able to like Mr Akagi or something like that.
(I do find…Mr. Akagi taking care of me tenderly, so I got callous, thinking that Mr. Akagi may be thinking about me now…when he said that he liked someone, I thought he was confessing to me…)
She was so ashamed.
Koremitsu was only taking care of Aoi on Hikaru's behalf.
(Mr. Akagi was frowning hard on the roof. He looked really troubled.)
When Koremitsu frowned and reached his hands out to Aoi, she thought he was going to embrace her.
His face was really in pain, and he looked to be at his wits end.
But even if he did embrace her, it would be the same thing as when he embraced her during her birthday day, just a replacement for Hikaru.
(He was worried that I don't have anyone to rely on, so maybe that was why he was taking care of me as Hikaru's representative. This may be a burden to him…and that may be why he looked to be in so much pain.)
She could not bear to see Koremitsu should such an arduous look again.
And she did not want Koremitsu to give her an embrace in Hikaru's stead.
That was definitely what she did not want to accept.
I really hate you! Aoi yelled.
(I have yet to mature even from the time when Hikaru was still alive.)

—I hate Hikaru.

She actually did love him, but was never able to be honest.
It was the same during the culture festival, when Hikaru gently asked her,

—Shall we go together?

—Hikaru, you still have a lot of people to accompany, right? Go out with them all you want. I hate philanderers.

She turned her head away, saying this.
And so, she regretted why she did not tell Hikaru that she really liked him, that he should not go with the other girls, and asked him to just focus on her.
If she could have told him that back then, even if Aoi was not Hikaru's 'most beloved', but that he still liked her.
(Then it would have been the same for Hikaru back then.)
She not only caused trouble for Koremitsu, but also for his classmate Honoka. While Aoi was sobbing away, Honoka gave chase, and even encouraged her on the roof, saying 'Akagi definitely likes you, Your Highness Aoi. Do listen to what he has to say'. At that point, Aoi was unsure of who exactly was the upperclassman.
(Miss Shikibu definitely likes Mr. Akagi too, but.)
She felt vexed within, and wanted to cry again.

"Aoi! Th-this attire…!"

She lifted her head upon seeing this shaken voice, and found her cousin, the 3rd year, Shungo Tōjō, staring at her.
Shungo was dumbfounded, the graceful etiquette and beautiful face ostensibly collapsed. He looked flustered and furious, his lips quivering a few times, wanting to say something as the emotions overwhelmed him. Finally, he was barely able to say something.
"Why are you wearing such an indecent attire?"
"…It is the clothing for the culture festival."
Shungo was already languid, no longer able to maintain his overprotective attitude as he said nonchalantly,
"Should you not be wearing an outfit like hers?"
Shungo pointed at Michiru, and called her over.
Michiru was wearing a fluffy, one-piece nurse uniform with the skirt covering the knees. It was similar to the attire Aoi wore when working at the cafe, classic and cute in its own way.
Aoi herself wanted to wear that.
But in the morning, she requested to Tsuyako,
"I want to wear the same clothing as you and Miss Shikibu, Miss Tsuyako. There should be an additional outfit inside, right?"
The fitting clothes showcased the curves of her breasts and hips, and the skirt was only half as long as her thighs, so she was a little embarrassed. But she regretted Koremitsu treating her as a child, and really could not stand the thought of always being in Koremitsu's safety zone, wearing a frilly, cute uniform.
"Change it already! Argh, if only I came earlier! Now is not the time to handle the 'Lord Hikaru movie exhibition'! I already said no to the plan, and objected to it, but the girls raised their hands, stating democracy—it is

useless to talk about it now. More important, what is with your outfit, Aoi? You too, Tsuyako! Why did you not stop her? Did you make her wear this?”
Tsuyako relaxed her lips, perhaps perked by Shungo’s frantic attitude as the latter glared back.
“Calm down, Big brother Shungo. This has nothing to do with Miss Tsuyako. I wanted to wear this.”
“Wh-what did you say?”
Shungo began to panic incessantly.
“You really worry and complain too much. Please do not get in my way.”
Once Aoi harshly told him off, he looked completely bewildered.
“C-complain…Aoi says that, I complain too much…”
Shungo muttered away, lowering his shoulders.
Aoi wanted to chase him off, but a sense of guilt arose in her, and she felt gloomy within.
(I know that I want to dress up as mature as possible, but I am still immature within….)
She lowered her head, and then, there was a plastic cup of juice served with a straw.
“It is banana and blueberry juice mixed with honey. Hikaru used to love this combination.”
Tsuyako leaned over, and handed the juice over.
“Have a little break, will you not? You will feel your courage for love filling your chest. Trust me.”

She again caused Tsuyako to worry.
Till the end, Aoi remained so spineless and dejected; like an adult, Tsuyako said with a reliable voice,
“Hey, Miss Aoi. If Hikaru is still alive, and you did summon your courage to tell him ‘I like you’, perhaps I would have been lovelorn earlier.”
Aoi looked to the side, and Tsuyako was smiling away like a tender, poignant flower.
That smile was really alluring.
◇ ◇ ◇
“Where is big brother Koremitsu exactly?”
Shioriko, with a pink rucksack on her back and a grassy green pochette by her side, was looking around as she moved through the crowds of the culture festival.
She lied, saying that a classmate’s father would be accompanying them, and came to Koremitsu’s school alone.
Or to be precise, she came with a cat.
After putting on her shoes, Lapis approached Shioriko, appearing to wait for the latter as it looked back.
Shall we go? Shioriko asked, and once Lapis gave an aloof purr, the former placed the cat in the rucksack, and carried it along.
(If I’m going with a friend’s dad, I can’t go around freely; this is a rare chance to find out how big brother’s life is like in school. I need to promote myself to his classmates that he has such a cute future bride.)
A boy dressed in uniform approached the pretty girl Shioriko, saying,
“Is something wrong? Are you lost? Do you want me to help you find him?”
With a childish voice, Shioriko said,
“I’m looking for my big brother. He has red hair, and a scary face. It’s the first year, Koremitsu Akagi.”
“Ack! Akagi!! As in that delinquent king!? So-sorry! I got something on!!”
And so, he ran away.
The other students too scampered, muttering,
“Akagi’s little sister?”
“You’re kidding! Even if they’re dissimilar, there has to be a limit to that1′
“Wait, I think I saw this kid before!! Ahh! Isn’t that the elementary school girl whom Akagi had a scandal king!?”
“That’s the lolicon delinquent’s girl!”
“Woaahhh!! If we do anything to her, we’ll receive a one-way ticket to the hospital from him!!”
It seemed that Shioriko’s ambition to establish herself as Koremitsu’s wife in school was not something that could be easily accomplished.
“I’m called big brother Koremitsu’s woman.”
Her cheeks reddened as she giggled.
If she continue to ride the momentum and say that she was Koremitsu Akagi’s little sister, the rumors would spread, and the girls would shy away from him.

“But the problem is that I still can’t find him.”
Either way, she decided that she first had to head over to his class.
The rucksack on her back shook, and the seal was opened as a white cat popped out from it.
“Ah, Lapis!”
Lapis darted by the feet of the packed crowd with great agility.
“Ah! What is that?”
“Urk, a cat.”
“Hey, someone let a cat in!”
Voices could be heard from everywhere.
“What do I do now? Wait, Lapis!”
Shioriko gave chase, almost breaking down in tears.
◇ ◇ ◇
(Am I no longer someone important to Aoi?)
Shungo Tōjō was slumped in a chair in an empty classroom far from the buzz of the culture festival, his head lowered.
Aoi, whom he doted on like a little sister, chided him for being too nosy, and his mind went completely white.
His three older sisters, who were scathing in words and incorrigible in personalities, were saying “You keep calling Aoi here, Aoi there. That is disgusting.” “You have the rare prestige and appearance, and yet you started acting like a stalker for a female relative since middle school. If it is to be revealed, any woman will find it revolting!” “Leaving aside a love interest, you practically dote on her like a little sister. Are you celibate or something?” they kept ragging on him, and perhaps even Aoi too found him disgusting.
(No, am I no longer necessary not only to Aoi, but also to the Mikados?)
Compared to Asai, who took on Kazuaki and his mother Hiroka and sealed Kazuaki’s actions accordingly, he felt himself to have not grown at all, unable to defy his father.
He took in Hiina, whom his father gave birth out of wedlock, from the facility while keeping it a secret from him. It was a defiance to his father, and something beneficial to him when he had to deal with his father.
He decided that one day, he would surpass his father, and become an indispensable existence to the Mikados.
But in fact, when his father sided with Kazuaki, he was unable to do anything. The Shungo that would have said those words as his own person rather than being his father’s son did not exist at all. It was the same when he wanted to use Hiina for negotiations with his father. Shungo was unable to do that; at this point, he was still immature.
Should he be more flexible instead? Should he try to change his close-mindedness? On the way here, he wanted to ask the woman with long black hair and that posh, pretty back profile, but he never did.
(I guess I will never be able to be married.)
While he was mired in the darkness of his thoughts.

“Meow.”
He heard a cat purr.
There was an elegant white cat in front of the door, standing there courteously.
It had blue eyes, and was an aloof, intelligent looking cat. Shungo felt that he met it somewhere before.
(I-it feels like…)
Shuno recalled that the cat Yū Kanai raised, and felt this cat to be similar. That cat had the name Lapis, and it appeared to be raised by Koremitsu Akagi at this point. It was with his little sister Shioriko when they had the fireworks outing by the riverbank at the end of summer.

—Do you mind letting me hug?

The moment he said that, Shioriko glared back at him as if he was a lolicon. He hurriedly explained “No, I am referring to the cat in your hands.” , but Lapis slipped out from Shioriko’s clutches and escaped, possibly running away from him.

“Lapis hates you.”

Once Shioriko said that, Shungo was a little dejected.
After that moment, he recovered, and found Lapis tidying its fur by his feet.
“Surely, this time…” he tried reaching his hand forward, and at that moment, he got stared at again.
He wondered if he was hated, and was very dejected…
That white cat, the same as Lapis, suddenly appeared in front of him for some reason. Those glass blue eyes were staring at him with an aloof look, approaching him without making any sounds.
“Ohh.”
It curled itself into a ball at his feet, and closed its eyes.
(I-I guess I can pat it this time. No, maybe it will run away again. I cannot pat it or hug it. Maybe it is fine for me to look at it from up close…)
He had a thought that the cat would run away if he twitched even a little.
His breathing, let alone his body, stopped.
His lungs were gasping for breath, but he wanted to try out this little happiness, even if it was for a fleeting second. While he was conflicted with such a sour face, that white cat opened an eye.
It gently rubbed its face at his feet, looking annoyed as it stared at Shungo, who was all frozen.
Perhaps Shungo was dreaming due to the massive shock of Aoi ostracizing him.
No, surely there was a tender feeling coming from the sock on his right ankle.

While he was all rattled and confused, the cat did a little jump, and leapt onto Shungo's knees, before curling into a ball again.
(Th-this is…!)
His knees felt heavy.
Yet it was such a blissful weight.
The white cat looked to have its eyes closed, sleeping on his knees.
(Perhaps it knows that I am dejected, so it came all the way here to console me?)
Upon thinking about this, Shungo became elated.
He stared at the cat resting on his knees with tenderness.
He could not move, and he was cautiously breathing, but even with the restraints hindering him, Shungo really treasured this little cat that was just like Lapis.
(Where is this cat from? It has a collar, so it does have an owner…if the owner does not show up, I wonder if I can bring it home.)
♢ ♢ ♢
"I-i-i-i-it has been a while, Mr Akagi!"
"You came by, Beni? You could have contacted me before you came."
Koremitsu, manning the beverage stand of the Japanese Dance Club as an attendant, was dressed in a white coat and glasses with his back slouched as he talked to Beni Hitachi.
She was an acquiantance he met in the summer, and even now, they often exchanged messages. She had long, black glossy hair, was a pretty girl, had a nice figutre, and left many boys marvelling as they watched her from behind. When they peeked on her sidelong face however, they widened their eyes, and their bodies froze as they frantically averted them.
Koremitsu was already used to the common folk having such a reaction. He was focused on Beni herself, rather than the snake queuing in front of Tsuyako.
"That cute nose has yet to change, Miss Saffloer."
Hikaru's eyes sparkled as he said this. The name Saffloer was a secret identity between him and Beni. The latter's unique red face too was someething Hikaru found to be extremely cute, and so did Koremitsu when she smiled, and the nose reddened.
"Mr-Mr Akagi, you said that you were busy be-because of the work you had in the culture festival, so…so I thought I should come over and look. Th-that is what they call cosplay, right? A doctor…? It is really scary."
Beni, raised in a girl's school, was not really used to speaking with boys. She still remained a little tense when facing and talking to Koremitsu.
"A-and then, Miss Tayu is playing in the volleyball match, so I came to cheer her on."
"Tayu's the Saffron, right? As for the volleyball match, I guess it's the one where they have to wear dog ears?"

“Yes, it really does suit here. Sh-she lost the match, but it was really a close fight. I agreed to meet up with her later, an-and we are going to visit other stalls too.”
“I see. I’m really grateful that you’re here to see me. Will contact you through messages later.”
“Yes, I will send messages, too.”
Beni took a cup of juice Koremitsu prepared, waved her little hand in a bashful manner, again, there was a large empty space in front of Koremitsu.
He stared at the clock hanging on the wall.
2.45pm.
(It’ll be a little while longer…)

“I will have a Mint and Banana juice with honey added.”

“You?”
“Hello there, Mr Akagi.”
It was the intellectual girl who often frequented the cafe Aoi worked at, the one Hikaru dubbed as Miss Mint. She spoke to Koremitsu in a tranquil manner, and the latter widened his eyes,
“What a coincidence. You have an acquiantance in our school or something?”
“I suppose it is something like that. I am here to meet you, however.”
The transparent expression seemed to harbor some intent as they stared at him. When they met in the bookshop, she would stare at him in such a manner, and say some really interesting things.
“My master wishes to talk to you.”
“Master? Who?”
In the face of such doubts from Koremtisu, the girl gave an earnest smile, and with her wise, stoic voice, she spoke slowly,
“The prettiest flower in the world, an angelic woman.”
Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu, frowned.”
“Miss Mint, you…”
Hikaru seemed perturbed, yet had affirmed something as he muttered.
While skeptical about Hikaru’s words, Koremitsu listened in on him.
(Angelic woman? Who’s that?)
The girl placed a namecard on the table.
It was a simple namecard with only a mail address on it.
“If you are interested, please contact me.”
“Hey, wait. At least tell me your name!”
Koremitsu yelled, but the girl left without looking back.
“…”
Hikaru watched the girl leave from behind, and seemed to be pondering about something.
Koremitsu too picked up the namecard the girl left behind, wondering,

“Can I really send a message to this address? I won’t end up on some strange website, right?”
“Really, Mr Akagi, I cannot underestimate yuou after seeing two female acquiantances approach you.”
Tsuyako cheerfully served the hordes of customers as she turned her face to him, teasing him, and winking,
“It really is great that Miss Shikibu and the rest are not around.”
“That’s not the case, senpai.”
“I see. But you did keept that namecard in your pocket, no?”
“I can’t just throw it away.”
“I will keep it a secret. If there is any development, do let me know.”
“I said that isn’t the case already.”
While Tsuyako snickered away, Koremitsu sharply retorted back,
The cellphone alarm, which he had set beforehand, buzzed.
It was 3pm.
“Good work there, Mr Akagi. You can head back to rest. Miss Shikibu should be here soon, or perhaps you want to see her in the nurse uniform? You have yet to meet Miss Shikibu and Miss Aoi today, no?”
Koremitsu’s heart tightened when he recalled Honoka’s tearful, furious face and Aoi’s fleeting look,
“No, gotta go.”
But he answered as he took off his coat.
After this, the final, and most important activity awaited him.
He ruffled his hair, reverted back to his usual look, and shot down the corridor.
And he took off the armband.
“Koremitsu.”
“Leave it to me.”
He answered the floating friend beside him with a vigorous voice, darting towards the chaotic crowds.
◇ ◇ ◇
When was it that she first developed the habit of coming to this tree whenever she encountered something depressing
She was at the Cupid statue in the backyard of the middle school branch.
Surely no one knew the name of the tree growing at the back, bearing the refreshing white flowers and the scent of May.
It was not as extravagant as a Rose, as alluring as a Cherry Blossom, and as neat as a Lily.
The ordinary white flowers silently bloomed as they hid themselves in the lush green leaves.
The sight of the flowers wilting were not as dramatic as that of a Cherry Blossom; the flowers merely fell silently and gently in a forlorn manner.
Whether it was Spring, Summer, Autumn or Winter, the lush leaves continued to grow throughout the year, and it was the best for an

elementary schoolgirl to hide herself. For the middle school student Michiru, it was her favorite place.

—The older sister are really outstanding, but Michiru really is normal, is she not?

Michiru was already used to being compared to the sister older than her by three years.
Whether it was games, conversing with friends, or greeting her seniors, she wanted to be proficient with them, and the more she did not want to fail, the more her body became stiff, and her voice became shrill.
But even so, she did her best to engage in conversations, her limbs flailing about. Everyone else merely snickered, saying,

—Michiru really is weird.

—When I told her to help me do the next duty rost, she stammered and answered 'Y-yes, thanks.'

—Did she not understand what it means? I was just shoving the work to her, and yet it feels like she had to say thanks first.

—Ah, yes, there are many instances of her being like this.

Michiru did not know exactly when some words were appropriate, and what words she should say so as not to be mocked.
She was unable to converse with the classmates successfully, and if she kept doing this, would she be mocked by them? Would the teachers and her parents lament that while her sister was outstanding, she was spineless?
Michiru became tentative.
But even so, though she could lock herself in her room at home, she could not do that ijn school.
Whenever they played dodgeball in PE class, did group research during science classes, or when she recited in front of everyone during language classes, these were all things she was inapt at.
Whenever she failed, she could hear everyone else in class laughing, ostensibly mocking her, and was embarrassed as a result. She would then run to the tree in the backyard, and cup her knees in as she hid there.
She was comforted by the thick green leaves that formed a layered foliage, solaced by the white flowers that bloomed in the beginning of summer.
In a particular instance during summer, she came to school early in the morning, before anyone else did, and took down a branch of the white flowers, placing it in the classroom vase.
Nobody knew of the white flowers that bloomed so healthily, and she wanted to let everyone in class know.

Perhaps someone would like this flower.
However,

—Eew. I made the effort to get a Rose from my house, but there seems to be something placed in it.

—Eh? What is this flower?

—I don't know. I think the Rose Mayuka brought is prettier.

—:Let's throw it away.
The girls in the class grabbed the branch and threw it away, and Michiru watched on with the feeling that she was 'unwanted'.
Please, don't throw it away.
It's unimpressive, but it's a pretty flower.
And it does give off a nice scent too.
Stop. She wanted to say so, but she never did, for she feared that she would be mocked again. Just when the tears were about to well in her eyes.

—This is called the Tachibana.

There came a tender voice reminiscent of a sweet, fragrant flower..

—Hikaru.

The girls were suddenly elated, for the one speaking to them was Hikaru Mikado.
Everyone did say that even amongst the students in the middle school branch of Heian Academy, who were all from rich families, he in particular was of an exceedingly prestigious family.
Also, his white skin, cute effeminate face, and dazzling golden hair under the light made him just like an angel.
No matter which girl it was, their faces would redden whenever they met Hikaru, and they were captivated by him, wanting to be with me. Since the affiliate kindergarten, there were girls surrounding Hikaru, centered around him, beaming happily.
Michiru found herself to be a foreigner to him, an existence far from hers. Such a notion never changed ever since she entered the middle school and was assigned to a class. No, after seeing Hikaru's slender limbs, the speckless white skin and the cute beaming face, she felt that he was of a completely different level compared to her.
Surely, Hikaru would have felt Michiru was not someone he would not stop and offer his time for.
Perhaps he never did notice the girl with the name Michiru Hanasato in his class.

Yet that Hikaru knew of the name of the unimpressive flower from the backyard, which nobody else knew of.
While the morning sun shone in through the window, he stared at the flower delicately, opened his petal-like lips, and smiled sublimely.

—I really do like this flower. It is cute seeing how conservative it is, and really looks full of life. It appears to give off a memorable sent.

The rich, sweet voice he used to say this made Michiru cry more than before, but this time, it became tears of joy.
There was someone who knew of that flower's existence!
He called it cute and energetic, and says that he liked it!
Her heart was pounding furiously, and her face sizzled.

—I suppose we can put the Rose Miss Mayuka brought in another vase. Surely the janitor uncle will give another one to use if we asked him.
He placed his hand on the classmate's, and that girl in particular went beetroot.

—I-if you say so, Lord Hikaru. I too do find this flower cute.
And so, the other girls agreed, saying, "me too.", "I too do find this fragrant", chatting away.
Though the girls never did show much concern to those Tachibana flowers.
Until the white flowers wilted, Hikaru kept staring at them every single day with sonority, and he narrowed his eyes blissfully as he brought his innocent face closer to the flowers.
Michiru's heart pounded as she watched him since then.

Ever since, Hikaru became her prince.

There were many glamorous girls surrounding Hikaru, beaming as they came to him. Michiru however had a dream, wondering if one day, Hikaru would smile at him just as he smiled as he approached the flower.
Yes, like the soot-riddled Cinderella becoming a beautiful princess, and then becoming the bride to him.
Would he place the glass slipper beside her, saying "I have been looking for you"?
Hikaru did once say that the Tachibana flowers were cute in how conservative they were.
And so, Michiru's heart became clearer as a result.
In the middle school, there was a rumor that those that made their love confessions under the Cupid statue in the backyard would end up as an eternal couple.
During the culture festival in their 9th grade, Hikaru placed rings made of Pansies, Nadeshiko flowers, annd Cosmos as he swore love with them.

—I swear that I will forever be in love with you.

On that day, Michiru too had her knees cupped as she hid behind the Tachibana treee.
Hikaru was making love oaths to girls, not to Michiru herself, and the dizzying admiration and heartbreaking pain struck her as she peeped on them.
Hikaru's slender hands plucked the flowers to make rings, and they were alabaster and pretty.
The moment they were plucked, the flowers too squealed in happiness, ostensibly quivering.
I too wish to be plucked so tenderly.
Nobody could see her, and they would not scatter due to the cold breeze. If they scattered in those fingers.
If he could make an oath of love,
If I have a pure, exquisite heart like Cinderella, when would Lord Hikaru notice me?
Will he hold my hand and slip a ring on me?
If that case, surely the Tachibana flowers would not wilt so forlornly.
During the next summer, she would not be alone. She would probably be viewing the Tachibana flowers with Hikaru.

She did her best during the work nobody else wanted to do.
She never slacked off, made a fuss, nor complained about it as she maintained a beautiful heart.

But by the time she noticed it, she realized that nobody called Michiru by her name.
Class rep—
That was what they called her. She would continue to do such troublesome matters without hassle, and that meant that she was an easy picking for odd jobs.

—I think you should be the class rep.

—Class rep, I'm busy here, so please help do these too.

—The class rep will finish everything anyway, so it's fine to go back.

But even so, Michiru could not do anything other than to work hard. She accepted all that she was tasked with.
She could not grumble.
Surely, if she worked hard, she would be able to gain happiness.

One day, people would find the scent of Tachibana flowers and the beautiful souls they contained to be more better than the Roses, Cherry Blossoms and Lilies.
Hikaru was the school prince from the moment she entered the middle school, and one had to wonder when exactly did they start calling him Lord Hikaru.
It was impossible that such a pretty, glamorous, special person would choose a plain bespectacled woman like Michiru.
It was painful for her to return to reality and think of those matters; whenever the girls began to talk about him, she practically escaped from them. Whenever the girls surrounded Hikaru in the corridor and passed by, she would make a detour.
But occasionally, reallyh occasionally, if she found Hikaru alone, she would hide herself in a corner of the corridor, not wanting to be discovered by him as she stared at him.
Please, hurry and notice me.
Please show your smile to me.
She kept repeating those words.
However, Hikaru fell into the riverbank during Golden Week soon after he entered the high school affiliate.

“It’s 3pm now…ah.”
Michiru was seated at the counter in front of the haunted house, staring at her watch as she muttered. The other girl in charge of the counter vanished as she went to meet her boyfriend from another school.
“If it’s you, you can do it, class rep.”
“Y-yes, I don’t have any plans, personally.”
With a frozen smile, Michiru watched the girl hold hands with her boyfriend as she departed, saying with a sweet voice “I want some cotton candy. Let’s go do some divination for our compatibility later~’
(There’s still 2 hours until the public opening ends…)
The people passing by in front of her were either friends or lovers, looking elated. Michiru herself was alone, steated at the chair, and nobody noticed her.
The chatter and whispers filling the corridor pricked her skin like needles, and her heart chilled.
In her damp eyes, there appeared a fleeting figure of a white flower wilting gently, one nobody else knew of.
Little by little.
It looked so forlorn, so tragic.
(Not this year too…)
Whenever the culture festival approached, she would recall the image of Hikaru presenting the flower rings to the girls in front of the Cupid statue, and herself peeping on them under the Tachibana tree.

Surely, this time, she would be like them. She harbored such expectations, only to depspair.
During May this year, when the Tachibana flowers began to bloom, Hikaru passed away, and this became an eternal despair.
The white flower wilted without a sound, and, and she hid herself in the middle school backyard as night approached, cupping her knees as she basically mourned the death of that beautiful, dazzling girl. Nobody else would say the name of the Tachibana flowers ever again! That gentle boy really died!? A piercing pain struck all over her, and she felt the realism.
Just when she wanted to give up on numbing her heart and forget that despair, to continue living those days that would never change—
Koremitsu himself said that Michiru was just like a Tachibana flower.
He had crimson red hair, his eyes were as terrifying as a savage dog, and his verbal etiquette was crude. Her legs would quiver whenever he glared at her.
And yet that delinquent with the terrifying face, Koremitsu,

—Hanasato

He called her by the name nobody else did, and with a straightforward expression, he said.

—You're like the Tachibana flowers. You're plain, but you have a gentle memorable fragrance. I think that's very good.

It felt as if Hikaru came to fulfill the promise with Michiru, and possess Koremitsu's body to return.
Since then, the image of Koremitsu and Hikaru's expression overlapped, something she had never thought of before. Her heart quivered silently, as Koremitsu's words were like a spell cast on her.
Just as Cinderella changed her dress and put on the glass slippers as she went off to the ball, Michiru too undid her braids and removed her glasses. And appearing in the mirror was basically a completely different person.

—Wow, what's with this out of a sudden. You're cute, rep.

—You're unexpectedly pretty. Class rep

It was the first time her classmates actually lavished praise on her.
This surely was the Cinderella spell. She spaced out, thinking that she could finally choose the prince belonging to her.
But Koremitsu was only worried about Aoi or Honoka, and never paid any heed to Michiru. The classmates too did say "Her appearance did improve a little, but she's the same as usual inside. She really can't read the mood, can't hold conversations well, and anyway, she's just fussy."

If she was not chosen by the prince, the Cinderella spell would surely be broken.
As she recalled how Koremitsu made requests and bossed his classmates around, her throat was breaking apart, and her heart was wincing in agony as it struck her like a thunderstorm.
Surely Koremitsu too did not need Michiru's help, and Michiru would never appear in his sights.
Again, this year was a no go!
She would again be in that place the next year, watching the Orange flowers wilt!
She watched the forlorn flowers wilt, and the lonely cuckoos that were similarly lonely. No matter how they chirped on, nobody would approach them. The red thing in their mouths was due to them practically coughing blood as they chirped, but even so, the only one willing to watch the white flowers wilt was that one winged cuckoo.
The petals were falling silently as Michiru sat on the chair, her body shrinking in pain and sadness.
The white petals fall one by one, like the glow on a firefly.
They glittered one by one.
No matter how forlorn and lonely they were, it felt that they would be alone as they wilted right in the middle of where the other Tachibana flowers wilted.
Surely that was the case, and that she would remained alone there. She always thought of herself as lonely, hearing the lonely cuckoo chirps as she whispered with a trembling voice,
"The cuckoo in the village where the orange blossoms fall sings and sings on many and many a day."
In my orange blossoms, nobody else can come in other than me.
In my orange blossoms, nobody will respond to the cries of the cuckoo, except me!

"Hanasato!"

At that moment, she heard a voice.
She looked over at the white blossoms that glittered and wilted, and there was a clear, vigorous voice from there.
Over there was her classmate with messy red hair and a sharp glare.
Koremitsu Akagi grabbed Michiru by the hand, saying,
"Let's go for a culture festival date!"

Chapter 7 - Eternal Flower

“M-M-M-M-Mr. Akagi…!”
Michiru, who had her hand held by Koremitsu, widened her eyes, her mouth half opened as she panicked.
Koremitsu’s face too sizzled as he said,
“Don’t refuse me now. I did my best to set aside time for this moment, to go around school with you.”
Unlike Hikaru, who was used to inviting girls out, Koremitsu himself was rather embarrassed by this situation.
And furthermore, how could he endure this any further if Michiru was to run away in fear?
Feeling anxious, he grabbed Michiru’s fingers firmly, and exerted strength on them.
While seated on the chair, Michiru looked up at him, her face beetroot.
“B-bu-bu-bu-but, I-I’m in charge of reception. I-I’m the only one here right now.”
“There’s still one more supposed to be here, right? Where did she go?”
“She went out with her boyfriend?”
“What? She left everything to you to go dating with her boyfriend?”
“Th-th-th-th-th-th-that’s because I don’t have any plans. So-sorry…please don’t glare at me like this.”
Michiru’s neck cringed.
“Koremitsu, you cannot be so furious towards a girl. You have to talk to her gently, for you are the prince today.”
Hikaru floated above him, cheerfully chiming in advice.
“Yes.”
Koremitsu weakened his tone.
Michiru assumed that she would be chided again as she looked up.
“Tch.” Koremitsu clicked his tongue, tapped Michiru on the forehead with a fist, barely touching it…and knocked on it.
“You’re too kind-hearted.”
Michiru widened her eyes in shock.
Koremitsu diverted his bashful face aside as he held onto Michiru’s hand, yelling into the classroom.
“HEY! CAN ANYONE DO THE RECEPTION?”
The remaining students stared at Koremitsu, and upon seeing him grasp Michiru’s hand firmly, they were shocked.
Both Michiru and Koremitsu had such red faces.
What exactly happened on the corridor!?
Surely, they had all sorts of imaginations going on in their minds.
And amongst them, a boy timidly raised his hand.
“Erm, if I can.”

The plain looking face certain did seem to register in Koremitsu's mind. Was that not the one seated right in the middle of the 3rd row? Koremitsu did also see him staying behind after school to deal with the work.
And so, another boy raised his hand as well.
"Me too."
That boy too was someone he often spotted after school.
Koremitsu inadvertently felt touched.
"Thanks. Then you two are…?"
They worked together, but Koremitsu did not know their names at all. It was only till this point that Koremitsu actually noticed this, and he frowned.
And so, the duo spoke apprehensively,
"I-I'm Yoshida."
"I'm Onodera."
They responded.
And just like that, Koremitsu's heart warmed.
"Many thanks, Yoshida and Onodera! I'll repay you guys!"
He was really grateful as he answered them.
And so, he again faced Michiru,
"Now you don't have any reason to refuse. Let's go."
"Mr. Akagi, but, that?"
He dragged Michiru by the hand just as the latter continued to fuss, and they walked off.
Behind them, their classmates seemed to be chatting about something.
"When did Akagi and the class rep…!?"
"Speaking of which, did Akagi not smile when he said thanks!? It wasn't as scary as a vengeful spirit. He just smiled."
"I-I-I-I-I-I saw that too!"
"That Akagi actually smiled!?"

"Wait, Mr. Akagi!"
"Time for you to give up now. If we go back to the classroom now, both you and I will be embarrassed. We'll be embarrassed either way, so might as well enjoy ourselves a little."
Koremitsu walked on as he led Michiru by the hand, and the students passing by were staring at them with surprised looks, like their classmates did.
"Bu-but, why…why a date out of the sudden?"
Michiru's voice got increasingly softer, probably because she was bashful due to the surrounding stares. Koremitsu grasped onto his hand firmly, perhaps to encourage her.

"Because you made a promise, with Hikaru."

"!"
Michiru's shoulders jolted.

With a crude voice, Koremitsu continued passionately,
“In Middle School, back when Hikaru was surrounded by both female and male classmates, you were the one who folded the white flower and sent him notes to encourage him, right?”
And right beside Michiru was Hikaru, watching tenderly over her, saying,

“Placed inside Koremitsu’s shoe locker was the same note put inside mine, and there was a song about the Tachibana flowers written on it. I so happened to scent upon some Fragrant Olives, and I recalled about you putting the Tachibana flowers in the classroom vase. Back then, there was a refreshing scent similar to the Tachibana flowers from you, which meant that you were the one who put those flowers there. I already knew back then, Miss Hanasato.”

“You brought the Tachibana flowers to class and decorated it, right? I thought of it, and I immediately understood. This note, and the song written about the Tachibana flowers; you were the one who placed it there.”
There was an intense, perturbed look on Michiru’s face.
“Th-that’s a lie. Nobody else would have known about me bringing the Tachibana flowers to the classroom. I was the earliest to arrive in the morning, so I secretely—”
“Back then, you had the same refreshing scent as the Tachibana. Hikaru then noticed that you were the one who placed the Tachibana flowers into the classroom vase.
Michiru’s face again showed surprise, and some bewilderment, followed by some emotions mixed with anguish.
“…I see. So…Lord Hikaru knew…that I brought the Tachibana flowers…”
Michiru’s emotions were conveyed in her stammering voice.
“So he knew, it was me.”
She continued to stammer, feeling so touched, and appeared ready to break down at any given moment.
Hikaru remained beside Michiru as she was, embracing her as he whispered by her ears,

“You never talked to me, and appeared to shun me, so I felt that I was never loved by you, and I could not talk to you. When I was ostracized by everyone, I never thought you were the one who sent me the message, and never noticed the white Tachibana flower.”

Hikaru’s voice was filled with sweetness, filled with the thanksgiving and love for the girl who showed him tenderness and encouragement when he was younger.
They merely exchanged messages for 3 days.
But he was so elated, so warmed.

Even when talking about that, he would still show a tender smile at this point.
“Hikaru actually thought that you hated him, because you’re the serious class rep, and he’s the damned harem prince. He was actually worried about that, so he never greeted you.”
Hikaru liked girls, but even though he would drift from one flower to another, surely he would have an innocent side to him.
For example, not doing anything to the girl, his childhood friend who had a clean streak, for fearing that she would say that she ‘hated him’.
For example, loving a certain person even though he could not do so.
For example, not wanting to cause trouble for a pure, serious, easily flustered class rep.
And so, Koremitsu was the one conveying the feelings in Hikaru’s stead.
“That guy’s rather innocent himself.”
Michiru’s eyes quivered.
Her heart too was overwhelmed by the fragrance of the Tachibana flowers as she stared at the memories of the days with Hikaru.
Perhaps she recalled that figure, voice, and movements Hikaru did when he was younger..
With a cheery face, Hikaru said,

“The white flower you gave me was the Tachibana flower, am I correct? The one who retrieved my recorder and the drawing tools, the white flower encouraging me is the Tachibana flower, and this spirit of the Tachibana was the one whom I said to.”

“The white flower that helped Hikaru, and the bird that assisted me was you, right?”

He had been assuming that the one sending the letter with the little bird, the one who compiled a list of what the other classes were doing, and all the work that was to be done in the culture festival.
However, the one that helped him was Michiru, who was always beside him during the preparations of the culture festival.
She never denied those statements, looking perturbed as she curled her lips tensely, stammering softly as she appeared to utter something; that was a reply more affirmative than anything else.
And while Michiru remained so, Hikaru gave a tender smile,

“That bird is the cuckoo, is that not? There are often hymns pairing the Tachibana flowers and the Cuckoo, including the Man’yōshū, which includes poems pairing them. The words written on the bird were from those poems, I suppose. The rainy night comes from Ōtomo no Yakamochi’s poem (TN: Poem number 3916) ‘The Scent of the Orange flowers and the chirps of the cuckoos linger on scantily in the rainy night’, and the line ‘When friends

meet come’ from the poem by Ōtomo no Fumimochi (TN: Poem number 1481) ‘The Oranges and cuckoos chirp when friends meet’. The message written in the flower was ‘The cuckoo in the village where the orange blossoms fall sings and sings on many and many a day’, of Ōtomo no Notabito’s. (TN: Poem number 1473). The other poems too are the same; and they really do fit you, the ever studious Miss Hanasato.”

“If we’re talking about the Tachibana flowers here, I can only think about the Cuckoos. Those words are written beside the picture of the birds, and I guess you probably copied them from some hymns about the orange flowers and cuckoos. That really was a roundabout way of doing things, and I really ain’t good at such elegant stuff like Hikaru. I guess Hikaru wouldn’t have realized it if he didn’t have a hint or whatsoever.”

Again, Michiru looked perturbed as she muttered something, her face again blushing as she lowered her head. The hand held by Koremitsu seemed torn between bending the fingers to grasp it back, and letting it go. She was a terrified dog.
For the straightforward Koremitsu, the creatures called women had extremely complicated, bizarre thought patterns.
Due to Hikaru’s requests, Koremitsu managed to establish relationships with a few women, and yet he was amazed by the thought in this. He was astounded as to why she had put in so much thought.
Michiru herself gave Koremitsu some suggestions discreetly, slipping information at Koremitsu desk anonymously, and even drew a picture of the cuckoo there. She even left a Tachibana flower note in Koremitsu’s shoe locker on the day before the culture festival.
Hikaru, who noticed the white flower note was the Tachibana, noticed that the bird drawing was a cuckoo, and understood that the one who helped both Koremitsu and Hikaru was Michiru.
However, surely Koremitsu would not understand if he was to see the white flower note by itself. Michiru herself probably never thought that Koremitsu would know who placed the flowers in the classroom, let alone the fact that Koremitsu could hear the words of the deceased Hikaru beside him.
Why did she draw the cuckoo on the envelopes however?
Why did she hint at the words related to the Tachibana flowers and the cuckoos?
Why did she leave the Tachibana flower note in the shoe locker?
Why did she whisper “It’s despicable…to remain anonymous.” with such a forlorn look?
Koremitsu was earnestly pondering about this with his all as he patrolled the school as a security member, moved the human lights around, and blended bananas and blueberries at the beverage stand.

He wondered what Michiru was thinking for not revealing that she was the cuckoo, and what her wish was as she continued to slip notes in Koremitsu's table.

"You saw me as Hikaru himself."

Michiru's hand, resting in Koremitsu's grasp, suddenly shivered.
And Koremitsu firmly grasped the icy hand that tried to escape, saying,
"You made me sit while facing away from the sun, deliberately gave me honey sweets, and tidied my clothing. My fact wouldn't be that visible when I was sitting there."

—Erm, let's see…ahh! Mr. Akagi, do you mind sitting here?

Her face was blushing as she stood up, placed the empty chair beside the window, and stared at Koremitsu with a look of yearning and expectancy.
After Koremitsu sat there, she gave a delighted look.

—It-it's better to button up that one, I think

—P-please straighten your back too…P-please be gentler in the way you speaking…
Her face practically melted as she watched Koremitsu nibble on the Macaron.

—"It's honey macarons. There's honey added in the skin too.

—Wow. This really looks good. I want to try some too.

—Mr. Akagi! There's still a lot! Please have some more!

"Are you an idiot!? How do you resemble Lord Hikaru in any way? You don't!" Honoka exclaimed in rage as she heard that, but back then, Michiru clearly was not seeing Koremitsu, but Hikaru himself.
"So-sorry."
With tears in her eyes, her face contorted due to sobbing.
She lowered her head and shrank, and looked very apologetic, to a point where if there were dog ears on her, they would fold.
"Because you said the exact same words as Lord Hikaru, Mr. Akagi."
She said with a barely audible voice.
"The same words?"
"Ab-about me, being like the Tachibana flowers…that although they're ordinary, they have a nice scent, very memorable…and that, they're fine that way. Lord Hikaru too did say he like that scent…that there's a memorable thing about it…"

Michiru lifted her head at Koremitsu.
A tear trickled down her face due to the anguish.

(Ahh, I see. Back then, Hanasato cried.)

I-I always hoped that I can be like Hono, so I bought the same accessory as her. I did at first, but it's different now. I'm me now, the best class rep in Japan.
And while Michiru said that so forlornly while trying her best to act positive, Hikaru noted tenderly,
Miss Hanasato, you are like the Tachibana flower, a pure white flower that hides deep within the green leaves. Perhaps you might not be noticed by the others, but you are determined and devoted, giving off a memorable fragrance. You are a charismatic girl yourself.
And so, Koremitsu too conveyed the words to Michiru, his words resonating with Hikaru's,
You're like the Tachibana flowers. You're plain, but you have a gentle memorable fragrance. I think that's very good.
Back then, Michiru stared at Koremitsu's face for so long, and silently shed some tears.
Surely, that was the moment where she began to see Hikaru in Koremitsu.
Michiru would remember every single word Koremitsu did say, and engraved everything about Hikaru within her. She kept observing him like one looking to save everything in a folder within her. This itself shook Koremitsu's heart.
What was Michiru thinking when Hikaru suddenly died?
Surely she had been weeping alone again.
And after that, she could not forget about him, and kept thinking about him.
Hikaru, who certainly was no longer able to become her lover—
Caressed Michiru's arm gently from sidelong, and with a forlorn, gloomy look, he stared at her.
Hikaru never held back the earnest love and sweet talk necessary for girls to bloom into beautiful flowers.
He complimented them, loved and showed them the affectionate smiles, like one tending to them with clear water.
To Hikaru, all the flowers were so precious, so adorable; but he too noticed that after he died, the words he said back then became the source of their agony.
Surely they would find it unbearable.
Koremitsu's body too was wincing, stabbed by needles as he felt that bitterness.
And to prevent Michiru from being more hurt and intimidated, he did his best to sound calm and serious,
"Sorry for not being like Hikaru, with my rough hands, and my face and hair like this…"

The image of a prince certainly was beyond his grasp.
And he could not show a sweet smile, speak beautiful, flowing words with a transparent voice, or even how to think like that.
“However,”
Koremitsu himself was proud to be Hikaru’s friend.
Koremitsu himself felt elated and honored to be able to convey Hikaru’s words.
“Until this culture festival ends, I’m Hikaru’s representative.”
And so he turned to Michiru, shivering in sadness, and told her with such directness.”
“I’ll fulfill your wish in Hikaru’s stead. You’re really looking forward to that lover full course, right?”
The tears kept flowing down Michiru’s tender face, and with a skeptical look, she looked up at Koremitsu, her eyebrows lowered.
With his empty hand, Koremitsu wiped her tears off.

“Let’s go try it out together!”
◇ ◇ ◇
The rough fingers gently caressed Michiru’s cheeks, wiping the tears off her.
“Let’s go try it out together!”
The moment she heard Koremitsu say this with such a positive look, the voice, and that serious expression reverberated loudly in her heart.
(I saw Mr. Akagi as Lord Hikaru himself, but Mr. Akagi’s not angry with that?)
Anyone else would have found it revolting or delusional upon learning that someone saw another person on them and had some delusions themselves.
As Hikaru’s representative however, Koremitsu remained as Michiru’s lover until the end of the culture festival.
And he was showing such a prideful, cheerful face.
With his overly large hands, he grabbed Michiru and darted towards the bustling crowd.
“Oh yeah. You set off the sprinklers, didn’t you? Back then, you combed your hair, put on the nurse cap, and had a half-sleeved gym clothes because your clothes and hair were wet, and you hurried off to change your clothes, am I right?”
Michiru’s heart nearly ceased to thump.
“Th-the fluorescent lights were flickering, and I wanted to change it, so even after asking the janitor, he said it was fine, and wouldn’t change it for us, so I…put the chair on the table, and fell off. I hit the sprinklers, and I-I think I wrecked it.”
“So, how did you end up setting off the sprinklers?”
“W-well, everyone would have been concerned about that, so I didn’t say that out.”
After she muttered,

“Well, we managed to make it in time, and did it well, so it’s not all that bad.”
Michiru’s tense shoulders relaxed, and those, along with her legs, wobbled like Tokoroten as she nearly collapsed on the floor.
And that did not happen due to Koremitsu’s large, sturdy hand that was holding her hand tightly.
Michiru too…held that hand firmly to not sit on the floor.
Koremitsu bashfully averted his stare, his face beetroot.
“Because of the special security work, I had the entire map of the culture festival memorized, so I got to thank Asa for that. We don’t have much time left, so let’s just make a brief trip around. First, let’s go get some Takoyaki, and then, some cotton candy.”
“Bu-but, Mr. Akagi…you, don’t really take sweets, don’t you?”
“Well, that’s the case, but…”:
For some reason, he glanced above, frowned a little, and then turned his face forward, looking tense.
“Leave it to me.”
He concluded.
With Koremitsu holding Michiru’s hand, they went downstairs towards the courtyard filled with stands. The latter’s face was sizzling, her heart pounding furiously.
“One takoyaki, two picks, and as for mayonnaise…”
He looked at Michiru, apparently affirming,
“N-normal will do.”
“Normal amount of mayonnaise.”
“Ah.”
“What?”
“That…Katsuobushi.”
Koremitsu again averted his stare,
“Give me a little more of that.”
He eked these words in front of Michiru.
“That’s enough, right?”
“Y-yeah.”
And while Michiru nodded slightly, he poked a pick into the takoyaki he received, and handed it to her.
“For you.”
“Th-thanks.”
Just when Michiru was about to reach her hand.
“Th-that’s not it.”
She received a glare.
“Y-you’re just showing this to me?”
“That’s not it.”
Koremitsu again glanced diagonally above, appearing to ponder over something. Then, he stared at her, saying,
“Open your mouth.”

“Ehh?”
“Do-don’t lovers do this? OR that’s what Hikaru told me. Damn it, well, I’ll definitely do this if it’s me!”
“B-bu-bu-bu-bu-but!”
The folks surrounding both Koremitsu and Michiru outside a radius of approximately 3.5m were all staring at them, their eyes widened as their bodies froze.
It was so embarrassing!
But Koremitsu served up the Takoyaki, with lots of Katsuobushi topping, and brought it to Michiru’s mouth.
(Mr. Akagi is embarrassed to be doing this too.)
But he still did so, for Michiru’s sake.
They were lovers for just two hours, but he wanted to play this role as best as he could.
That emotion was certainly not an act, but ostensibly something to be conveyed from something swirling in the heart.
With determination, she opened her mouth, and ate it. The fragrance of the sauce and katsuobushi spread in the mouth.
“I-it’s naice.” (TN: Note, it’s not a typo. This is deliberate…)
She wanted to express her worry if the food was too hot, but it was just right.
And while she expressed her thoughts as she chewed,
“Uu, I-I didn’t eat much since morning. I’m hungry.”
Koremitsu too muttered, his voice increasingly softer.
“!!”
He closed his eyes.
“Hanasato, f-feed me too!”
He yelled, and opened his mouth.
“Eh!?”
“Hurry!:”
“Y-y-y-yes!”
She took the other pick from the Takoyaki box Koremitsu had, stuck it in, and timidly popped it into Koremitsu’s mouth.
And so, Koremitsu kept his eyes closed as he closed his agape mouth.
“!”
“Woah!”
She placed the food deep inside, depth notwithstanding, and because of that, Koremitsu had Michiru’s fingers in his mouth too.
Shocked, Koremitsu opened his eyes.
His eyes met hers at such a close distance, and the sensation of her fingers lingered between his lips as they both blushed.
Koremitsu opened his mouth, and Michiru retreated her fingers.
Koremitsu swallowed the Takoyaki without chewing on it much, and began to cough. Michiru frantically patted him on the back.
“Are you alright, Mr. Akagi!?’

“A-ack, so-sorry.”
Koremitsu straightened his body, and their eyes met again, their cheeks flushed.
Upon seeing Koremitsu’s eyes teary due to him choking on his food, her heart throbbed, and she picked up another Takoyaki.
“Th-this time, please have it slowly…okay?”
She said as she served it to Koremitsu, and the latter was left red faced as he again ate it.
“You too, Hanasato. Have some.”
Koremitsu said that as he too picked up another Takoyaki. Once she saw the Katsuobushi littered over it, her heart got fuzzy, with some itchiness aroused within her.
“Yes.”
She too showed a natural smile, her mouth opened.
And so, both of them ate the 8 Takoyakis in the box, 4 each. Koremitsu’s face was tense and flushed, and Michiru’s was sizzling in embarrassment; yet both of them enjoyed themselves.
“Hey, will lovers actually eat in such an embarrassing manner? Did I get fooled by Hikaru or something?”
“No, right now, that’s exactly how lovers should be eating takoyaki. That’s why my heart’s really pounding like crazy.”
“Is that…so? Then, no, forget about it.”
Koremitsu diverted his stare to the sky, and gruffly muttered.
“Alright, not for the cotton candy. I feel a little thirsty now. Let’s go get something to drink, ‘kay?”
He held a red-faced Michiru by the hand, and walked off.
They bought soda water and cotton candy from a stall, and shared them. Koremitsu drank a quarter off the soda water can, and Michiru frantically retrieved it, drinking. Both of them divided the cotton candy in half, peeling scraps and feeding them to each other.
Koremitsu really had issues dealing with sweet foods, and he frowned as he forced himself, saying,
“We-well, I’m still good with this.”
The soft cotton candy slowly melted on Michiru’s mouth, lingering there as it became a sweet, sugary liquid. The parts that were yet to dissolve completely remained delicious too.
After that, they went fishing for water balloons, and entered a haunted house.
Koremitsu remained serious as he handed a balloon with blue and white patterns to Michiru.
And that balloon bobbled in Michiru’s palm.
“Ehhehe, I wanted one when I was young.”
“You never been to a festival?”
“My family’s strict, so I’m really happy to be able to fulfill my wishes.”

Michiru let out an umpteenth number of screams in the haunted house as she latched onto Koremitsu, who embraced her firmly with his slender, yet sturdy and muscular arms and chest. The stench of sweat, and ink, could be scented from his body, yet Michiru found that to be a wonderful scent.
No matter where they went, the focus was upon them.
That delinquent king was holding hands with a girl? They were even flirting with each other, causing the onlookers to look extremely dejected.
Michiru's neck retreated as she whispered that,
"You're the only one I can see,"
And Koremitsu answered,
"And your voice is the only thing I can hear."
It started to get hot deep within Michiru's eyes.
(Mr. Akagi just said something really amazing.)
And he was so earnest with it.
But as Koremitsu kept leading her by the hand, she got noticeably less distracted by the surrounding stares. Furthermore, she felt like a princess at a ball, basked in the onlookers' stares as she danced with a prince.
That was the scene Michiru saw in her dreams.
That day, Hikaru walked towards Michiru with a gentle smile, saying, "So the flower messages are from you? Thank you for helping me. As promised, will you be my lover?" reaching his hand out to her.
And so, Michiru would hold Hikaru by the hand, their hands clasped together as they strolled through the bustling campus during the culture festival.
Koremitsu's hair was red and messy, and his face was so terrifying, it was unbefitting of a prince's face.
He was the complete opposite to the graceful, grandeur Hikaru.
But though he may be gruff, he kept taking care of her; there was some tenderness conveyed through his crude verbal etiquette; he unexpectedly knew how to gain a girl's favor.
"Speaking of which, I haven't thanked you properly. Thanks to you, I managed to complete the committee member work, and I feel that the culture festival isn't such a bad thing. Thanks a lot for helping both Hikaru and me. Thank you, Hanasato!"

—Thank you, Miss Hanasato.

While Koremitsu thanked her so bashfully, Michiru seemed to recall Hikaru saying such words with a dazzling look as well.
Koremitsu's face was utterly red, his lips a little ostentatious, the red hair soaked in sweat looking so dazzling under the sunset. Michiru found it to be as pretty as Hikaru's, her heart throbbing.
(Mr. Akagi today really is like a prince.)
The public closing time slowly approached.
"Want to look at the Tachibana flowers at the end?"

Michiru gritted her teeth as she nodded in the face of Koremitsu's question.

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The backyard of the Middle School campus was basked in a faint orange sunset.

"It has yet to change since the time when I was in Middle School."

He stared at the Cupid statue with an affectionate stare, and there was the Nadeshikos and Cosmos growing on the flower bed by the feet.

"You see, Koremitsu? That is the Tachibana tree."

The place Hikaru pointed at appeared to have oval, glossy leaves. Behind the Cupid statue, in the midst of the green leaves, the blue fruits could again be seen basked under the golden sunset.

Michiru too was basked under the same color, looked moved as she touched those trees.

The breeze gently swayed the Cosmos and and her hair, but did not sway the sturdy leaves and fruits of the Tachibana flowers as they remained there silently.

Hikaru moved his slender hand towards the leaves.

"It will be great if it is May now. It is a pity that you were unable to see the extremely vibrant, vigorous white flowers, Miss Hanasato."

He stared at the green leaves that got increasingly brighter with a sacred expression of yearning and love, and diverted his eyes towards Michiru, looking a little tense beside Koremitsu.

"But well, it is fine, for the flowers will again bloom the next year. Do you know why people swear eternal love under this Cupid statue? That is because this Cupid statue is surrounded by the Tachibana flowers, which in turn represents eternity. In the distant past, the Emperor commanded the Tajimamori to bring back a rich, fragrant, immortal fruit from the Toyo no Kuni, the timeless fruit called the Tachibana, or orange."

That rich, sweet voice lingered in the backyard under the forlorn sunset.

"Hanasato."

When Koremitsu called out to her, Michiru's shoulders jerked in shock, and she turned towards him.

She obviously looked a little tense, clumsily lifting her head.

This classmate of his was showing a puppy-like expression,. Even without others knowing, this girl kept working hard, for her class…

"Hey, do you know the reason why the rumor that there'll be eternal love if people swear their oaths here?"

Michiru shook her head.

Hikaru gently muttered,

"This flower will continue to bloom no matter how it wilts. Even as people depart, countries change, it continues to remain there. In the early summer, it will give off a refreshing aroma, and upon scenting it, people will recall the past, reminiscing wonderful memories, and surely they will smile."

Koremitsu too looked at Michiru tensely,

“The Tachibana flowers signify eternity, or that’s what Hikaru said. Even if they wilt, they’ll keep blooming in the next year, or the year after, giving off a refreshing fragrance or sorts.”
He conveyed Hikaru’s words to Michiru, who kept yearning for Hikaru.
Unlike Hikaru, Koremitsu did not have a tender expression or pretty lips, and did not have the nice voice the latter had.
However, he was earnest, seriously conveying Hikaru’s thoughts, Hikaru’s love, and Hikaru himself to the girls he loved.
He wanted to convey to them that it was wonderful for them to be able to love Hikaru, that Hikaru was fortunate to be born in this era, this world, that he wanted them to think this way.
And so, he wanted them to know.
How much Hikaru actually loved them.
The luxurious stems of the Cosmos swayed gently with the breeze, and Koremitsu snapped it crudely.
Taking in a short breath, Michiru straightened her back slightly.
Upon seeing this, Koremitsu again exerted strength, as it appeared he was about to confess to Michiru again.
(Well, it’s definite that without Hikaru haunting me, I won’t be able to become a member of the committee, and I won’t know what’s good about Hanasato.)
Surely she did not garner much attention, but this girl was like a Tachibana flower, leaving a tender fragrance in the heart, her expression as adorable as a puppy.
Koremitsu himself too received lots of help from Michiru.
With Hikaru watching over him, he heard the pounding of his heart as he twirled the stem of the Cosmos, stopped at the base of the flower, and formed a ring.

And then—

While his face was beetroot—

As he stared right into Michiru’s eyes—

He slipped the flower ring onto Michiru’s slender finger.

Michiru kept staring at that ring.
“I’m Hikaru’s representative…and the flowers already bloomed in spring. After scenting upon this fragrance, you’ll recall about what happened today.”
Even if they were lovers for just two hours.
Whether it was the brightness of the sunset, the refreshing sensation of the breeze, the sensation of the dirt and grass inside the shoes, the brown hair swaying around the slender shoulders, the lips opened in delight, or the emotions, the bashfulness he could sense, Koremitsu could sense happiness, love.
Also, there was also the time when they were facing each other at a single table in the classroom after school, discussing about the culture festival. His heart throbbed due to the lively, puppy-like eyes, the itchiness caused by the slender fingers that gently caressed Koremitsu’s rough fingers, and the sweetness of the colorful Macarons of blue, orange and yellow.
Surely he would recall them over and over again.
The broadcast indicating the end of the public showing could be heard from afar.
Michiru wiped the tears off her face, smiling,
“I…too will like to thank you, Mr. Akagi.”
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Thank you—
These words encompassed all the heartfelt thanksgiving Michiru had, and she conveyed it to the red-haired boy, standing there bashfully with a frown.
This was the most blissful, special day.
For the wish was finally granted.
From behind the Tachibana tree, Michiru had long watched the girls who swore oaths with Hikaru, and admired them, feeling bitter, her heart pricked.
She was envious that they were able to get flowers from Hikaru, and was anguished as a result.
She really wanted to grab those hands.
She really wanted to stare into those eyes.
She wanted to give him the pain, the bitterness, and the sweet delight.
And then, she would become lovers with him, not just alone, but with him, to watch the white flower blossoms.

“Can you be my girlfriend?”

“Yes, I will.”

That was the deal they had written on the letters, and the three days were like a treasure.
The miracle once happened, and she lifted her head, hoping for it to happen again. She never complained about inequality, and maintaijned a pure

heart. Countless times she had to watch the wilting Tachibana flowers alone, and her heart was crushed.
Perhaps after the flowers scattered, she would be left alone.
She felt that perhaps it would be easier for her to give up.
But Hikaru's friend fulfilled this in his stead.
And those thoughts glittered as they ascended.
The aroma of the white Tachibana flowers spread all over her chest, making her blissful.
Surely, even if the Tachibana flowers did wilt, she would no longer despair over te future.
And there would no longer be a cuckoo chirping in agony due to suffering.
"I cannot keept waiting on my one. I have to walk on with my own feet, push the lush leaves aside with my hands, and see the pricnes. I couldn't believe Lord Hikaru's death, Mr Akagi, and I never bade farewell to him at the funeral. So since you are representing him, can I, say it to you, Mr Akagi?"
Koremitsu nodded.
Michiru said to the younger Hikaru, that day,
Her lips smiling,

"Farewell."

Epilogue - At the Time of Farewell

I do remember very well the name of that bespectacled girl who always worked hard.
As the class representative, you really did your best without any grudges.
You were always panicking, but that is definitely a show of the utmost effort.
When things are not going your way, you would lower your shoulders dejectedly and shed tears. After that however, you would approach the other party gingerly, yet head on.
I do feel that you were really cute being like that.
I am hailed as a harem prince, and you would lower your head whenever you saw me, running away from me. I never had a chance to talk to you.
We were linked by the same thoughts.
During the days when I was called the useless person by the girls in the class, the white flower pixie supporting me was an instant 'grace'-like existence.
There was a faint fragrance when you passed by.
I never did see you, but my body and soul silently remembered that scent.

There was once when I made a request to you 'can you be my girlfriend'.
And you answered me 'yes'.
Back then, I never saw the shape of the white flower that gave off such a refreshing scent…
It really is great that I can fulfill the promise I made with you, though I have no idea when it was.
Surely, this will be my final culture festival on this world.
It really is great to have you spending this special culture festival with me, and I truly feel this way.
You showed the prettiest smile possible when I placed the ring of Cosmos flowers on you.

Hey, Koremitsu.
Were you also not moved by that smile?
There is nothing to be ashamed of. This is a natural result after being dosed by pretty flowers.
Did you also not think how fortunate you are to have such a cute, adorable girl as your first female partner in this culture festival?
Surely Miss Shikibu, Miss Aoi and Asa will not be rest assured.
And surely, it will become a topic starting tomorrow.
That you, the delinquent king, was sharing takoyaki, cotton candy with such a cute girl at the culture festival, fishing for water balloons.
Why is it that your face suddenly became so red?

You're the only one I can see, and your voice is the only thing I can hear! actually, I did hear such cool lines from you, you know?
And then, what did you think?
Ahh, there is no need to cup your head and squat down.
Surely you will be hailed the flirting delinquent king starting tomorrow, you know? And that will be a bad thing for Miss Hanasato too?
Though I may conclude this, I can be certain that Miss Hanasato would not have such thoughts.
At first, she was bashful when you two were walking together, but starting midway through, did she not smile so cheerfully?
Surely, the 'thanks' Miss Hanasato said is from the bottom of her heart.
Have you also noticed too, Koremitsu?
Unlike before, amidst the expressions and voices in the rumors when talking about you, there was some goodwill laced in them.
It was when you stopped the girls from quarreling, chased down the boys from another school flirting with the waitress in the festival house, and when you desperately went about carrying the crying little girl on your shoulders, looking for her mother.
You have a terrifying face, but there are people who do think that perhaps you are a serious person.
That includes your classmates too
While everyone was ready to give up after the background sets were soaked in water, saying that they could not make it in time, you shouted at them, telling them that they should only say that when they really cannot make it.
You really are an amazing person, a really trustworthy person, viewed by all with respect.
And thus, there was a different scene from before; when you asked for someone to take over the reception, did Mr. Yoshida and Mr. Onodera not help to take over?

Hey, Koremitsu.
Surely, little by little, everyone is beginning to like you.
And you are able to enjoy a happy school life with everyone.
That personally was what I wished to do, and what I could not accomplish, you did.
This truly is something worth celebrating.

You will not be alone once I depart from this world.
And you will surely be able to make friends.
Really.
So, even if I am no longer around, you will be fine. Until that time comes, I will be able to leave the Earth in relief, and begin my own journey.
Surely with a smile—
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Once the closing ceremony ended, the students returned to their classrooms, and after a brief meeting, class was dismissed.
“Er-erm, Mr. Akagi.”
The duo who took Michiru’s place as receptionist spoke to Koremitsu, their shoulders tense.
“Ah, Yoshida and Onodera, right? Thanks for that.”
Koremitsu briefly recalled their names, and said so in an awkward manner.
The duo too looked jumpy as their eyes swam about, elbowing each other.
(What? Do they have something they want to request from me? Well, I did say that I’ll pay them back.)
While scowling as he pondered, Yoshida spoke up,
“E-everyone in class decided that after this, we’re going to a karaoke box to celebrate the success of the culture festival today. So, you too, Mr. Akagi…”
Yoshida trailed off, and Onodera continued,
“W-w-we’ll like to invite you as well.”
“Yes.”
Yoshida too muttered.
Koremitsu was shocked, and for a short while, was left speechless.
“Now then.” Hikaru himself seemed to be egging Koremitsu on from the side as he beamed.
“It’s…fine for me to go too?”
This was the first time someone actually tried to invite him out to a success party.
Till this point, the class had yet to include him in the class contacts list.
Did I mishear that? After he asked this blankly, the duo answered in unison,
“Y-you’re our committee member in the culture festival, Mr. Akagi.”
“Yeah. You were the one who encouraged us and prepared everything for the class exhibit, and that’s why we could succeed.”
“You’re not coming after all, Mr. Akagi!?”
The other classmates in the classroom were also anticipating Koremitsu’s reply as they stared at him.
“Yes, Mr. Akagi will definitely participate, right Hono?”
The one asking this so cheerfully was Michiru.
Honoka’s shoulder jerked in shock, and then,
“…Well, Akagi’s very free anyway, so he’ll go.”
She continued to fiddle with her cellphone while looking away from Koremitsu, looking nonchalant.
(This is bad…I feel like crying.)
Koremitsu felt something hot rising up within his throat, and covered his face with his right hand, his lips quivering, and he widened his eyes, apparently shocked by his classmates.
It was incorrigible of him, but his throat kept shivering.

—You will be able to enjoy your school life with everyone.

Hikaru’s words became reality.
“Koremitsu, if you do not hurry.”
Hikaru, by the side, gently spoke.
Koremitsu opened his mouth, and put his hands down stiffly, his face sizzling as he answered everyone with a trembling voice.
“Oh…yeah. I-I’ll come along too…I guess.”
Yoshida and Onodera beamed, seemingly relieved.
After seeing their expressions, Koremitsu’s heart became warm as a result.
“So then, this is the map of the shop.”
He received a message from Yoshida.
“…Okay.”
“See you later then, Mr. Akagi.”
“O-okay.”
He was no longer able to say anything else. Surely he did not think that he did not like the culture festival or something.
Michiru went by Yoshida and Onodera as she approached Koremitsu, smiling as she whispered,
“I’ll be going there first, Mr. Akagi… do be there.”
She gave him a meaningless stare.
But after hearing that, Koremitsu recalled that he had something he had to do.
He turned to Honoka, and the latter pouted her lips, staring at her cellphone screen.
The actions Michiru did to Koremitsu a while back did seem very intimate.
Honoka looked absolutely terrifying as she practically decided not to face him.
With a finger on her lips, Michiru slipped out from the classroom.
And the other classmates began to move.
“…Shikibu.”
With a rigid voice, Koremitsu hissed.
Hikaru floated in the air as he watched over them, silently supporting them as he practically cheered them on.
Honoka’s fingers, which were fiddling with the message, stopped, but she did not reply Koremitsu as her lips curled increasingly, and she then continued to type her message.
“…”
“I got something to say. Mind hearing me out a little?”
“…”
She did respond to Koremitsu’s words, but perhaps she could not speak up as she had already ignored him once. The perplexed stare was swimming about, her face increasingly tense.
“Please?”
Sweat was trickling down Koremitsu’s forehead and armpit.
And finally, cold words came from Honoka’s mouth,
“…It’s not good to keep Michiru waiting.”

Honoka was practically saying that she would be joining Michiru and the rest at the shop, and also hinting that Michiru was waiting for Koremitsu.
“Hanasato already went off to the shop.”
“Eh!?”
Honoka lifted her face, and looked around the classroom.
There was basically nobody else in the classroom except for Koremitsu, Honoka and a few girls. The girls chatted as they left the classroom, and it got quiet.
After that, only Koremitsu and Honoka were left behind.
“…!”
Honoka muttered, and raised her eyebrows,
“I’m going too.”
She slipped her phone into her pocket, carried her bag, and stood up.
“Wait. Listen to me, just for a moment.”
Honoka was too stubborn, and Koremitsu got anxious as he grabbed Honoka by the wrist to make her stop. The former then looked away from him.
“What? Are you going to announce that you’re dating Michiru?”
Honoka retorted bluntly. Her eyes became feeble, and she quipped gloomily,
“…I heard that you and Michiru were feeding cotton candy to each other… and that you walked about with your hands held together, Akagi, and all sorts of things…”
“The one liking Hanasato was Hikaru. I just took his place and accompanied her until the culture festival ended. We aren’t really dating!”
“Huh!? You’re still saying the nonsense about Michiru seeing you and Lord Hikaru’s faces together?’
Honoka gave Koremitsu a chiding stare, but she froze there after seeing him give a serious look.
She looked ready to break down in tears, perhaps because she was unable to evade his eyes.
“B-but…Michiru’s feelings for you…”
“Hanasato’s the one who told me to have a proper talk with you, Shikibu.”
Honoka’s eyes looked extremely mystified
“Michiru…?”

—Hono has been evading you because of me, Mr Akagi.”

At the backyard basked with hope, after Koremitsu slipped the flower ring on Michiru’s hand, the latter looked elated as she whispered,

—I said to Hono that if she just viewed you as a classmate, she shouldn’t be getting in our way. I didn’t want Hono and you to be just on friendly terms, Mr Akagi.

—So Hono's been concerned about me, and unwilling to talk to you.

Sorry.
And then, with a smile on her face, she lifted her head.

—It's definitely a lie if that Hono view you as a mere classmate, Mr Akagi. That's obvious from her attitude.

—Please patch things up with her.

"Hanasato said that you were the one who asked the classmates scared of me to help out after school."
"!"
Honoka again gasped.
"In exchange, you had to participate in the friendly matches, take part in the volleyball exhibition game, and the Shogi reception or whatsoever."
Koremitsu's face was filled with bashfulness and confusion as she stared back at him.

—Hono has been worried about you all this time, Mr Akagi. She's been thinking only about you.

Upon recalling Michiru's words, Koremitsu's face grew increasingly hot.
Michiru was the one who had been giving suggestions to Koremitsu, supporting him as they prepared for the culture festival.
But Honoka had been acting aloof, secretly helping Koremitsu.
It was not a complete mistake to think that the sender of the cuckoo envelopes was Honoka.
Honoka opened her mouth, dumbfounded.
And Koremitsu let go of Honoka's hand, lowering his head towards her,

"Thanks, Shikibu."

One had to wonder how many times had he thanked Honoka.
It was always when he realized Honoka had been helping him out, that he felt some hint from Honoka's words, gained some courage from her, was moved in some way; that was the feeling filling his heart.
Again, Koremitsu nudged his body and stared at Honoka. Hikaru vanished from his sights before he knew it, surely watching over him.
"I-I didn't exactly….speak up to everyone else in the class for your sake…"
Honoka eked those words out,
"And then, I took part in the friendly matches, not because of you…"
And then,
"No."
After several seconds of silence, a fleeting expression appeared.

“This isn’t it.”
She spoke with a hoarse voice.
That calm face and voice was completely different from her usual feisty self.
Koremitsu’s heart jolted, his breathing paused.
“I did it…because of you.”
With damp eyes, she lifted her head tentatively.
It was dark outside the window, and one could practically hear the pounding of the heart inside the window.
“I actually wanted to tell you the truth, Akagi. No matter who you went out with, if it’s based on your real intentions, I’ll give up. Michiru was angry at me, and said that if I just thought of you as a classmate, I shouldn’t be talking to you. That’s because I lied. I will never do this again; I won’t try to bluff, nor will I be lost.”
She stared at Koremitsu as the latter watched with bated breath, and with much thought in her eyes and words, she confessed,

“I like you, Akagi. Not in the usual like, and not as a classmate. I like you, Akagi.”

Koremitsu’s head immediately sizzled.
But at that moment, there was an extremely anxious voice.

“I too…like Mr. Akagi!”

Both Koremitsu and Honoka were practically repelled as they turned to the voice in unison.
Standing at the entrance of the classroom was Aoi.
“Miss Aoi…”
Koremitsu could hear a little murmur from Hikaru behind his head.
(What did Aoi just say!?)
Honoka stared at Aoi with a petrified look, and watched the latter shout with all her might, summoning all her courage as she slowly approached.
Aoi stood in front of them, and spoke with a near-teary look.
“Sorry.”
Was she saying sorry to Honoka, Koremitsu, or to the both of them?
With a pained, suffocated voice, she said,
“But I too like Mr. Akagi. I do not wish to lose to you, Miss Shikibu. I wish to like Mr. Akagi as a male.”
The posh Aoi actually had such an agitated side to her.
Actually, Aoi was a girl who had that side to her. There was the time when she yelled at Hikaru’s corpse ‘you liar’—
That agitation and devotedness was being conveyed to Koremitsu.
With a stifled voice, Honoka said,
“I-I too won’t lose to anyone in my feelings for Akagi, whether it’s you or anyone else, Your Highness Aoi…! I won’t back down!”

And while both girls unleashed all their emotions, Koremitsu was left as confused as a raft stranded in a thunderstorm.

Hikaru too hid himself, not voicing anything.
Koremitsu could not be bothered with what emotions Hikaru had with regards to Aoi's confession. All he cared about was that he was in no man's land between the two girls pursuing him.
He did not know how to deal with the issue at hand.
And beyond that, he could not express his feelings for both Aoi and Honoka.
Did he have to answer immediately? Did he have to answer at this place?
Koremitsu, basked under the harsh stares, was at his wits end as he stood in front of the blackboard, unable to solve a tough maths question he had yet to fully comprehend. His heart nearly ceased, the sweat pouring like a waterfall.
Suddenly, the cellphone in his pants pocket vibrated.
He was unable to give an answer, but he managed to escape from their sights, and after a little sigh, he checked the sender.
At that moment, he felt a numbing shock racing through his mind.
While Koremitsu widened his eyes and jerked his shoulders, Honoka and Aoi watched on with bated breath.
The message was sent from Yū Kanai in Australia,
Koremitsu did not dare to blink even once as he stared at the message left on the cellphone screen,

"In a few days, I will be visiting Japan.
I hope to meet you again."

◇ ◇ ◇

(Did my message reach Mr. Akagi…?)
In the yard lit by the outdoor lights and the moonlight Yū's delicate finger pressed the send button, and stared at the cellphone screen for a long time even after the words vanished from it.
"Did you sent a message to your boyfriend that you are heading back?"
She turned to the rich sweet voice.
There was a bespectacled youth with feeble, slanted shoulders and a tender face standing in front of the Poplar trees growing in the vast garden of the luxurious nursing care facility; he gave a serene smile as he remained basked under the moonlight.
"E-erm, that is…"
Yū's face was completely flushed, not knowing how to respond. Upon seeing her fidget, he narrowed his eyes, beaming as he said with a lukewarm voice,
"Good to see that you are going to be reunited with your beloved boyfriend."
He, Hikaru's half-brother, looked to be as gentle a person as he appeared, and had the same tranquil voice. Perhaps it was for this reason that Yū, ever so weary, was able to calm down.
"I came to call you in as the after-meal tea is prepared. Come, do come inside and hear me out."

He never did ask who Yū sent the message to, and prompted the girl in. The latter placed the shut cellphone at her chest, saying with a voice that was ever so chirpy.
“Yes, Mr. Kazuaki.”
◊ ◊ ◊
The culture festival was over, and the bustling atmosphere in the school campus cooled. Surrounded by silence in the student council office was Asai, who was giving a conflicted look as she sat on the chair,
“There is another 2 months until labor, is it?”
The stoic voice appeared to be restrained in emotion as she inquired the secret contact.
“Do you think that **the child inside her** is Hikaru’s?”
The girl had straight, neat, short hair resting on her shoulders, and a refreshing, intellectual expression; with a voice of clarity, she answered,
“I do not know.”
Even at this point, Asai had been observing Hikaru’s heart up close, closer than anyone else, and was conceited at this fact. This girl standing in front of her was the one who was closest to Hikaru’s most beloved, Fujino Mikado, and she knew of Fujino’s actions, and her heart.
“However,”
That girl cautiously continued.
Asai’s face paled as she listened with terror,
“On that snowy night in March when Mr. Hikaru returned to Shinshu, the one Mr. Hikaru bonded with at the Church was not the Japanese Cypress, but the Wisteria.”
◊ ◊ ◊
Hikaru,
I never did forgive you.
I will never forgive you for only looking at others when you should have been looking at me, and being blissful.
I will never forgive you for escaping alone from the world that was just the two of us.
I will never forgive you for loving me, swearing an oath of love with me, hurting me, and deserting me.
I will never forgive you, for letting out of the clasped fingers as you showed that beautiful, cruel smile.

Thus, I had no choice but to kill you.

Side Story - Asai Saiga's Miscalculation ~ You're Too Bad at Sympathizing

Asai Saiga had always assumed herself to be a cerebral woman.
She felt that she could use this cerebral mentality of hers to command others as she pleased.
“…But why is it that it simply does not work on that person?”
Appearing in her mind was that galling underclassman of hers with a lush red hair, sharp eyes, the rash presence of a mutt all over him, and she frowned hard.
♢ ♢ ♢
“Yo, I’m here.”
“Now that was fast.”
While Koremitsu Akagi opened the door to the student council office, Asai coldly faced him as she muttered.
“Aren’t you the one who asked me to hurry over? What’s the problem? I can do anything for you right now.”
She did anticipate an anxious figure appearing in front of her after being summoned through the public announcement system, but Koremitsu in turn was abnormally enthused. There was no way this person would have been delighted to be summoned by Asai…
“Anything…?”
“Yeah.”
Koremitsu’s lips and eyes were showing delight after all.
“…”
The list of what Asai wanted him to do flowed through her mind in that instant.
(What exactly shall I make him do…)
She raised her eyebrows, trying to ponder over it. However, rationality overcame her immediately, and she coldly said,
“I suppose not. I am still not that deplorable to a point where I need you for assistance.”
“You really aren’t being cute here. What do you want?”
Yes, she had given him too much leeway. She could no longer let him continue with this insolence, or rather, to make sure he did not view her as an enemy, and to cultivate his goodwill and respect towards her, before he would be eventually controlled by her—
While Koremitsu curled his lips, Asai folded her arms presumptuously, as she said,
“Mr Akagi, I hereby commission you to be part of the culture festival special security group.”

And thus, her chances of interacting with Koremitsu would greatly increase with the veil of work. While Koremitsu would stumble his way through the work, Asai would then follow nonchalantly, force him to recognize her ability, and gain a favor from him
(I suppose it might be very interesting to tease Mr Akagi with words when he fails.)
And as she continued to secretly contemplate about this, hidden under that stern expression of hers was a minuscule, probably even a speckle's worth of expectations hopping inside her.

"Do you know what day is it today? Mr Akagi. It is 2 days before the culture festival."
Asai anxiously summoned Koremitsu through the school's PA system, and yet Koremitsu did not rush over to her, for he, completely overwhelmed by his class and Japanese Dance Club events, did not pay any particular heed to the work Asai tasked him,
"Sorry."
Koremitsu weakly apologized.
(What is with that feeble apology? You made me wait so long. The same thing happens whenever we talk about Hikaru; is there not a more dire topic we have to talk about? It feels like you are deliberately trying to avoid the topic whenever I mention Hikaru…"
She got furious, and inadvertently frowned.
"I suppose there is quite an anomaly for you to actually apologize to me directly."
"That's not it, alright? Even I'll apologize to anyone if I offend that person. I'm already extremely busy with the stuff in my class, and I admit that I forgot all about the special security group."
"…I see."
(He really did forget about all…)
She clicked her tongue.
"Well, I will not be commending you for that."
She really had the impulse to give him a cold lashing, only to think through rationally,
"Well, it is a good thing to be able to reflect on yourself, if you do not repeat the same mistake over and over again."
And she did a slight dig at him.
Asai then gave Koremitsu an enormous amount of work instructions, and while the latter grumbled, he finished them obediently. The fact that he did not simply give lip service, but actually backed up his talk, was firmly recognized by Asai. When Koremitsu remained wary against Kazuaki, and had a private conversation away from the mother,
"Ohh! You're rather reliable, Asa."
His face immediately broke into marvel.
"…Of course."

She loosened her lips, and turned her head aside.
Everything went well till this point.
Only that things went wrong afterwards.
Koremitsu suddenly looked strange when Asai mentioned Aoi, and his eyes swam anxiously, his voice a little shrill. An ominous premonition arose within Asai.
“Mr Akagi. Do you like Aoi?”
Only that things went wrong afterwards.
Koremitsu suddenly looked strange when Asai mentioned Aoi, and his eyes swam anxiously, his voice a little shrill. An ominous premonition arose within Asai.
“Mr Akagi. Do you like Aoi?”
Once she asked, Koremitsu hollered with extreme insanity, “Not at all!”
Surely he would not have reacted so violently if it was right on the mark.
While Koremitsu continued to excuse himself with his eyebrows raised, face flushed, temples pulsating, his actions completely defied his words, and Asai faltered again once she realized this Koremitsu could no longer control his own emotions.
(Wait, did he actually fall for Aoi?)
Koremitsu had been taking good care of Aoi till this point, and tried his best to be gentle to her. Though Asai herself refused to admit it, he had been very gentlemanly towards Aoi. Asai had been pondering if Koremitsu intended to be Aoi’s knight in Hikaru’s place, yet she belied that Koremitsu would not do anything to Aoi, Hikaru’s ex-fiancee.
And yet he was being so flustered over Aoi!
While he continued to deny it, he was practically confessing that he was head over heels with regards to Aoi, and that he could not help it.
Asai’s heart throbbed in pain.
(It is vexing. Why is my heart hurting so much? My nervous system should be flawless. Ahh, yet it really hurts.)
And after Koremitsu hollered for a while, he regretted it, and calmed down.
“I shall pretend that I did not hear your words then.”
Asai stubbornly hid the pain in her chest as she watched Koremitsu dangle his head in agony.
Yes, forget about it. Pretend not to hear it.
And it had to be Aoi of all people!
(No, perhaps he never noticed my true feelings till this point. I just need to divert those feelings to someone else. Yes, that is how I should do it. Him being with Aoi will only lead to misfortune. I in turn is able to establish a a rational, appropriate relationship.)
“Mr Akagi, do you understand why I placed you in the special security group?”
“Because you hate me? You want to cause me trouble?”
Asai raised her eyebrows at Koremitsu’s instantaneous reply, and held in her fury,

“You are the only boy I allowed to call me Asa.”
“Yeah, you don’t have any friends in the first place.”
“…That is not what I meant.”
How was it that this man just could not read the mood?
Having stating everything so plainly till this point, he still remained so oblivious!
And Asai let out a sigh from her lips,
“I still have a lot of documents to read through.. Since I have no time to continue chatting with you, please head out.”
For some reason, she was feeling lethargic.
(Is Koremitsu Akagi a dog after all? I cannot convey human language to him?)
No, there was still a chance in the culture festival.
And Asai Saiga was not a weak-willed woman to change her own objectives.

On the day before the culture festival.
Koremitsu’s class misused the sprinkler, resulting in the tools to be used for the culture festival soaked by the water.
Koremitsu pleaded with Asai for help, and Asai immediately deployed a large number of people to salvage the scene.
“I shall be looking to reclaim this debt another time, Mr Akagi.”
The agony lingering in her heart finally dissipated.
“Yeah, I don’t mind anything, even if it’s a Santa Claus cosplay.”
He actually stated that **personal matter** so brazenly in front of everyone.
Such a useless person; yet when she stared back coldly at Koremitsu, there was no sense of disgust with him.
The relationship between those two would definitely become stronger during the culture festival on the following day.

Yet—
Asai’s optimistic planning went amiss again.
On that day, Asai’s cellphone received reports regarding Koremitsu one after another.
“Koremitsu Akagi managed to settle down a sudden dispute between girls in front of class 2-3. Both of them fell on their butts, and one of them got scared off by him.”
“I see…”
“Akagi scared off a boy harassing two waitresses in class 3-4’s ‘Festival House’! With just a glare!”
“I see…”
“Akagi’s protecting a lost girl—ah, I think they found the mother. She thanked him, carried the child, and ran off.”
“I see…”
“This really is amazing. Everyone was worried what sort of nonsense Akagi will cause when you recommended him, president. That Akagi really is

impressive. His light footwork and sharp eyes really make him appropriate for this job!”
“…Of course. I did personally choose him after all.”
It was a good thing that Koremitsu’s standing in school was improving, and Asai was proud of it. However, Koremitsu was running about everywhere, and Asai too was so busy that she could not leave her position, so neither managed to meet each other once.
That should have been the case…perhaps she should call him through the PA system again.
(No. If I am to use the same method again, the effect will weaken, and I will be underestimated.)
While Asai remained bitter as she thought about this, time gradually passed by.
Once she learned from a student council member that Koremitsu was at the Japanese Dance Club’s juice stand wearing a white coat and glasses as a waiter.
(White coat? With glasses too…!? They really do not match.)
She was a little shocked.
(But, I want to have, a little look…)
Yes, she wanted to personally see how unfitting that was…
And with such a reason, she moved towards the juice stand.
“Oh, Miss Asai. I do apologize, but Mr Akagi just so happened to leave. If only you were here 30 seconds earlier.”
“…”
Asai was left speechless in the face of the vexing declaration by the president of the Japanese Dance Club, Tsuyako.
“If you want to, you may come in. This is honey juice with banana and blueberry mixed in. Your courage to fulfill your love will rise once you do drink this.”
I have no need for this, and I do not need you to worry about my personal worries after chiding the smiling Tsuyako, she took the plastic cup filled with juice from the latter’s hand.
♢ ♢ ♢
(And so…I never managed to meet Mr Akagi after all.)
Once the closing ceremony ended, Asai remained alone in the student council office, giving an icy look at the back of the chair right at the desk.
That Koremitsu Akagi was probably holding hands with his classmate, Michiru Hanasato, having their own date on their own whims. It was not Aoi, not Honoka Shikibu, but the plain girl with braids and glasses till the end of the first semester. Her charms and intellects were far inferior to Aoi and Asai, and even Hikaru did not do anything to that girl.
(What a humiliation.)
Koremitsu was probably dating Michiru Hanasato at this point. No, surely there had to be a reason why he had to do this, like before. She will soon coerce a confession out of him soon.

Yes, she will again call out for Koremitsu again.
The culture festival remained a culture festival until everyone returned home, and Koremitsu would not have any classmates asking him out, so he probably would be returning him alone.
The cup of juice she received from Tsuyako remained untouched in a corner of the table.
This juice that fulfills love is definitely a bogus. After all, I do not have anyone I like till this point
“Hm.”
She snorted condescendingly, and reached for the cup, using the straw to suck up the juice with its fruit fibers at the bottom of the cup after being left for so long.

Author's Notes

Hello there, this is Mizuki Nomura.
The 8th volume of ‘When Hikaru Was On the Earth…’ is about ‘Hanachirusato’.
The Hanasato in the original work is not exactly a beautiful woman, but has a beautiful soul. She is an outstanding, conservative woman, and at the same time, apt at reading the mood, earning the trust of Genji. In the chapter of ‘Hanachirusato’, Genji was filled with comfort and relief when he visited her, and his soul was practically cleansed.
She was not one to arouse others as a woman, but surely one would find solace when being with her, no? She was requested to be the stepmother of the recently born Yūgiri, son of Her Highness Aoi, and though this proved that he did prioritize her amongst the many wives Genji had, he was afraid that Yūgiri would end up like him, falling in love with his stepmother. He chose not to allow Yūgiri to meet the beautiful Highness Murasaki, yet he did not have such worries when it came to Hanachirusato. How rude.
Though Hanachirusato herself took care of him as a kin, Yūgiri did find her relatively unpleasant appearance to be particular grating, and told his father that the latter placed particular importance in Hanachirusato as a wife because he was being too kind; that truly was something rude to think about…
That probably was the flow of things, and after reading ‘The Last Love of Prince Genji’ in
the ‘Oriental Tales’ by Marguerite Yourcenar, I cried upon feeling how tragic Hanachirusato was. Please read it along with the original story.
As a change of topic, there are times when an author will subconsciously make use of a particular issue over and over again. In my case, one of the ideas was the ‘switching of the light bulb’. I had this pointed out to me after I was done writing, and woah, was I blushing. I do remember it being 3 times or so, or maybe there are more of such things which I don’t remember. As for why I like to use this, that’s because a few years back, my pet peeve was **changing the light bulb**. There is a cover on top of the 5 light bulbs lined side by side, and I could not remove it very well, so I spent an hour, practically in tears, fighting against this cover. Also, the ceiling is too tall, and it is difficult for me to work! I will stack a chair on the table, and the day after I maintain a *banzai* position, my back and neck would really hurt, so I had to adjust my body. Whenever the fluorescent lights break down, I will look to the ceiling and pray that it does not break down again, and I would really black out when I begin to work. Well, it appeared in this work. The lights have changed nowadays, and compared to the past, changing lights is easier right now…or that should have been the case. (the fluorescent lights I have been using the past two years have not failed, so I am not certain if it was changed, “It’s fine!” but the renovation company put

it this wa. On a side note, this is not because I had no other troubles. There are bigger ones!)
The next volume, Rokujō, is slated to be sold at the end of this year. This series will end once the next two volumes are printed. As the ‘Hikaru’ series is well-received by the readers, the sales figures are stable; I was able to begin writing earlier than planned, so I had finished the epilogue in the prior autumn, and I will be headed into the next series.
I had completed the 1st volume of the new series in Spring this year! It is slated to be sold after the final volume of the ‘Hikaru’ series. The theme is actually about the recently popular ‘vampire’, and I am worried if it is getting too popular when it is sold. I suppose it will be really busy given that I am writing such information in the afterword.
First off, there will be ‘Rokujō’ at the end of the year and the 4th volume of ‘I’m a royal tutor in my sister’s dress’, and again, I will like to ask of everyone to take care of me again.
Year 2013, July 14th

Mizuki Nomura.

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